

“Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ” (Rom. 10:17).

“One holy Church is to continue forever. The Church is the assembly of saints, in which the Gospel is rightly taught and the Sacraments are rightly administered” (AC VII).

The Church “has outward marks so that it can be recognized, namely, the pure doctrine of the Gospel, and the administration of the Sacraments in accordance with the Gospel of Christ” (Ap VII/VIII 5).

The Lord Jesus gives John a vision of the Church at the consummation of all things: “Behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, ‘Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!’” (Rev. 7:9–10).

Series Schedule

September 2016 – Covenant (Rev. John Rutz, Shepherd of the Valley, Perrysburg, Ohio)

October 2016 – Confession (Rev. Dr. Daniel Preus, Fifth Vice-President, St. Louis, Mo.)

November 2016 – Koinonia (Rev. Greg Alms, Redeemer, Catawba, N.C.)

December 2016 – Preach (Rev. Timothy Pauls, Good Shepherd, Boise, Idaho)

January 2017 – Sacrament (Rev. William Cwirla, Holy Trinity, Hacienda Heights, Calif.)

February 2017 – Reconciliation (Rev. David Juhl, Our Savior, Momence, Ill.)

March 2017 – Royal Priesthood (Rev. John Berg, Trinity, Sheboygan, Wis.)

April 2017 – Authority (Rev. David Fleming, Our Savior, Grand Rapids, Mich.)

Important Message

Due to circumstances beyond our control, no May Circuit Winkel Study was published. We apologize for any inconvenience caused.

This one, holy, Christian and apostolic Church is here and now, wherever the Word of God is present. The Word of God will have believers; it will not return to God without accomplishing His purpose!

The Church is created and lives by words — specific words, true words and every one of them God’s Words. “Let God be true though every one were a liar” (Rom. 3:4). As Jesus said, “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away” (Luke 21:33). For the third year we continue our series of studies to illuminate “Words of Life for the Church and for the World.”

Jesus sends His Church to bring life to the world through God’s Words, so that people may be baptized into eternal life through faith in Jesus Christ and be taught to treasure and observe everything Jesus has commanded (see Matt. 28:18–20).

In a desire to accommodate her surroundings, the Church may be tempted to adopt the words of the culture or society. To be faithful to the Lord who gave her *His* words, the Church must be faithful to the fullness of God’s Word. If the Church fails to do so, we can easily become like the friends of Job. Despite their love for their friend, their nice-sounding words with their friend, God says to them: “My anger burns against you and against your two friends, for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has” (Job 42:7).

The Great Commission’s charge to “[teach] them to observe all that I have commanded you” keeps the Church from modifying the meaning of any of God’s Words, lest the hearers cease to hear God and never be brought to the faith through His Word..

(Continued on next page.)

Therefore, the Church gladly and boldly, with love for the lost, takes up this glorious commission. Her desire is nothing more than to speak “the truth in love” and “to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love” (Eph. 4:15–16).

As Lutheran pastors, we are committed to a specific confession of the faith because we have found that confession to be a true and faithful exposition of all of God’s Word. The documents in the *Book of Concord* clearly lay out the teachings of Scripture helping the Church give the best possible comfort in Christ to hurting and broken people.

Why are the real textual and contextual meanings of God’s Word so important to us? Because of our commitment to Christ and to His Scripture as God’s Word and, most of all, for the sake of the Gospel of Christ. As the Scripture says, “Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual” (1 Cor. 2:12–13).

Lest the good and faithful words used to impart “spiritual truths” be taken captive to the redefining efforts of the culture or be lost in often-heard clichés or incomprehensible jargon, it is critical that we return to the real substance of the words as the Lord has filled them in His Word and as they are faithfully explained in our confession. Only in this way shall we be able to receive in faith the fullness of things freely given to us by God and joyfully give them away to others. In other words, we pastors are called to “unpack” these words for our people, pointing to the objective realities revealed in and worked by Jesus Christ for us.

The goal of each study, then, is to examine one of the words of faith our Lord has given to us, so that we help each other speak God’s Word ever more clearly.





September 2016

Covenant

Still More Words of Life for the Church and for the World
2016–17 LCMS Circuit Bible Studies

LEADER'S GUIDE

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FOCUS

The word *testament* is rarely found in the most widely used Bible translations. It doesn't appear in the text of the ESV, the NASB or the original NIV. It appears just three times in the NKJV, in 2 Cor. 3:14; Heb. 9:16–17 (The Greek word *diatheke*, translated as *testament* by the NKJV, is most frequently translated as *covenant*). We'll consider this more closely later in the study.

The word *covenant* in English Bibles is a translation of the Hebrew word *berith* or the Greek word *diatheke*. The theo-

logical content of the Hebrew *berith* is carried by the Greek *diatheke*, since the translators of the Septuagint (LXX), with only two exceptions, used *diatheke* to translate *berith*.

What is this theological content? Using what you know of the parallelism of Hebrew poetry, consider briefly Ps. 89:28, 33–34; Is. 54:10. With what word do they parallel *berith*?

In the ESV, *steadfast love*. In Hebrew, *hesed*.

SCRIPTURAL USAGE AND UNDERSTANDING OF THE WORD

The word *covenant* appears nearly 300 times in the Old Testament, and is used at least once in 26 of the 39 Old Testament books. It is to be found nearly 80 times in the Pentateuch and some 90 times from Joshua through Nehemiah. The word *covenant* appears at least 10 times in the Psalms, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, as well as in the twelve Minor Prophets taken as one book.

Covenant is not, however, unique to the Old Testament or God's chosen people. Scholars have noted that ancient suzerainty treaties parallel the form of the covenant the LORD made with His people. In its basic usage, however, *berith* refers to any agreement that defines the relationship between two parties, whether individuals or groups.

Read the illustration of this in Gen. 21:22–32; 26:26–31; 31:43–50; Joshua 9:6–16.¹

Note the parties involved in the covenant and the terms upon which the parties agreed. Gen. 21:22–32 (covenant in vv. 27, 32) Abraham and Abimelech and his posterity, dealing kindly; Gen. 26:26–31 (covenant in v. 28) Isaac and Abimelech, do no harm; Gen. 31:43–55 (covenant in v. 44) Laban and Jacob, faithfulness to Leah and Rachel and do no harm; Joshua 9:6–21 (covenant in vv. 6, 7, 11, 15, 16) Joshua/Israel and the Hivites of Gibeon, servitude rather than destruction.

More significant than these interpersonal covenants for Old Testament theology is the LORD's appropriation of *berith* for

use concerning His relationship to His creation generally, and people specifically.

Read the first use of *berith* in Scripture, which occurs before the flood in Gen. 6:17–20.

Read this passage, identifying the parties in the covenant: God and Noah and his family. Note who establishes the covenant and sets its terms. Note also the extension of the saving/non-destruction to birds, animals and creeping things in verses 19–20.

Read the next occurrence of *berith*, which is after the flood in Gen. 8:20–9:17.

Note that *covenant* doesn't appear until Gen. 9:9, but the covenantal terms are already expressed in Gen. 8:21–22. Parties to the covenant are God, Noah and his offspring, along with every living creature (vv. 9–10, 12, 16–17).

Read the next use of the word *covenant* in Gen. 15:1–21, God's covenant with Abram. This covenant is foundational to all biblical theology,² not least because of what is revealed concerning justification through faith (v. 6). The term *covenant* appears only in verse 18, but as with God's covenant with Noah in Genesis 9, the terms of the covenant *per se* should not be divorced from the context, including the call of Abram in Genesis 12. Another feature in this account, which appeared in the accounts of covenants

¹ Other examples from the period of the monarchy include 1 Kings 15:19 and 20:34 as well as the lengthy account of David and Jonathan, whose covenant is noted in 1 Sam. 18:1–5; 20:4–9, 12–17; 22:6–8; 23:15–18.

² For example, consider Lev. 26:42–45 along with 1 Chron. 16:15–18 (paralleled in Ps. 105:8–11). Although Genesis does not use the word *covenant* in recording the LORD's interaction with Isaac or Jacob/Israel, the holy authors clearly understood the LORD to be in a covenant relationship with them and their descendants.

reviewed above, is a formal ceremony to make — Hebrew “cut”, *karath* — the covenant.

Briefly identify the context and note the parties to the covenant: the LORD, who makes the covenant with Abram and, by extension, all of his offspring. Itemize the terms: (1) “your very own son shall be your heir” (v. 4), (2) innumerable descendants (v. 5), (3) inheritance of the land (vv. 16, 18-19).

Note that each of these terms were already part of the LORD’s promise to Abram when he called him in Genesis 12. Consider the ceremony. The LORD doesn’t instruct Abram what to do with the animals; the use seems to be intrinsic to the vocabulary (*karath berith*) and may have been familiar from the surrounding culture. The significance seems to be an oath meaning, “May I meet this end if I do not fulfill my covenant with you.”

Consider the LORD’s responsibilities under this covenant and compare them with Abram’s — to trust the LORD’s promises (v. 6). How was the LORD’s covenant with Abram different than (from) His covenant with Noah? (The covenant was with Noah and his family, all surviving humanity and all creatures with the breath of life. Abram was singled out to be one through whom the LORD would bless all the families of the earth.)

Read Gen. 17:1–21. The LORD again makes a covenant with Abram, now 99 years old. Years have gone by, Abram has had a son by Hagar, but Sarai is still barren.

Identify the parties to the covenant: The LORD, and Abram and Sarai. Which of the terms of the covenant are repeated from the covenant of Genesis 15? (1) multiply greatly, (2) gift of the land. Which are new here? (1) father of a multitude of nations, thus Abraham, (2) everlasting covenant to be God to with Abram and his offspring, (3) the land as an everlasting possession, (4) circumcision on the eighth day as a sign of the covenant, (5) a son by Sarah (v. 16).

Was there a formal ceremony to *karath berith*? Yes, circumcision. Note that this is the first time the LORD identified a penalty for breaking the covenant he was making (v. 14), cutting off from His people the one who refused circumcision (Hebrew uses the root *karath* for this cutting as well.)

The next covenant of the LORD recorded in Scripture is the covenant he cut with Israel at Mount Sinai. Before that, however, Exodus records that it was remembering His covenant with Abraham that moved the LORD to intercede on behalf of the descendants of Israel (Ex. 2:24; 6:4–5).

Read the recounting of these events at Sinai, as Moses uses the word *covenant* in Ex. 19:4–6; 24:3–11.

In these verses the word *covenant* is found in 19:5 and 24:7–8. Divide the group to look at the two passages and have them summarize what they find. In Exodus 19 the LORD recounts His relationship to the people and their expected response. Exodus 24 recounts the formal ceremony in which the covenant was cut — in which the LORD wedded himself to His people, e.g. Jer. 31:32; Ezek. 16:8; Hos. 2:15–16 — including a meal of fellowship. Have everyone briefly skim the content between these passages and characterize how they fit with the whole, noting the terms of the covenant. What is the foundational fact of this covenant? (see 19:4 and 20:2) How do the terms or stipulations relate to this?

In defining this covenant, see also Ex. 34:28; Deut. 4:13; 7:9.

Divide the passages among the group and have them summarize. These verses clearly identify the ten words of Ex. 20:2–17 — don’t forget the covenant language in verse 2. Deut. 7:9 speaks of the LORD’s faithfulness in keeping the covenant, showing that the covenant of Sinai is more than just “You shall” and “You shall not.”

There’s much more in the Pentateuch concerning covenants, including Moses’ words in Deuteronomy after the generation who had refused to go into Canaan had all died: “Not with our fathers did the LORD make this covenant, but with us, who are all of us here alive today,” (5:3) and the covenant renewal beginning in Deuteronomy 29.³

We will briefly look at another covenant which the LORD made with David in 2 Sam. 7:16, “Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me. Your throne shall be established forever.” (The word *covenant* doesn’t appear in 2 Samuel 7, but in Ps. 89:3–4 we read, “I have made a covenant with my chosen one; I have sworn to David my servant: ‘I will establish your offspring forever, and build your throne for all generations’ ”).⁴

Read the final instance of *covenant* in the Old Testament in Jer. 31:31–37. Jeremiah writes of a new covenant the LORD will cut with the house of Israel and the house of Judah in the coming days. Why is a new covenant necessary?

The unfaithfulness of Israel, “my covenant that they broke” (v. 32).

³ See also the renewals at Mounts Ebal and Gerezim and at Shechem, Joshua 8:30ff; 24:1–28.

⁴ See also 2 Sam. 23:5 and 2 Chron. 21:7.

Which former covenant will it supersede?

The covenant of Sinai, (v. 32).

What are the terms of the new covenant?

(1) Knowledge of the LORD — recognize that in Hebrew to *know* another is not just to have an intellectual knowledge of that person, but to have an intimate relationship with him or her, e.g. Gen. 4:1. (2) Forgiving and forgetting iniquity and sin (v. 34).

By what does the LORD swear to affirm His promises?

The fixed order of the earth and the immeasurable extent of the heavens (vv. 35–37).

The LORD's words in Jeremiah's context speak of the restoration of Israel after the Babylonian exile, but also alert God's people to be watchful for a new covenant he will establish in the coming days.

Moving into the New Testament and its use of *diatheke*, verses from Jeremiah 31 are quoted in Rom. 11:27; Heb. 8:6–9:5; 10:16–17. In addition, the adjective “new” is connected with *diatheke* in 2 Cor. 3:6; Heb. 9:11–20; 12:18–24. There is also “the new *diatheke* in [Jesus'] blood” of Luke 22:20; 1 Cor. 11:25. What do the passages from Heb. 8:1–9:28; 12:18–24 add to the understanding of the new covenant prophesied in Jeremiah 31?

Earthly vs. not of this creation — 8:4–5; 9:11: obsolete vs. new — 8:13: based on repeated sacrifices vs. a once for all sacrifice — 9:25–26.

Hebrews 9:15–20 shows why *covenant* is not a uniformly satisfactory translation of *diatheke*, since, unlike a testament, the death of the one making a covenant is not required for it to become effective. Unfortunately, shifting

to *testament* or *will* as the translation for *diatheke* obscures the connection to the covenants with Abraham and at Sinai, thus obscuring the significance of *new*. How might we best deal with this?

Teaching and explaining. It is perhaps analogous to the challenge with *paraklatos* of John 14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7 or *anthen* of John 3:3, 7, where no single English word conveys the full meaning of the original Greek.)

Consider other uses of *diatheke* in the New Testament, for example by Zechariah in Luke 1:72–73, Peter in Acts 3:25–26 and Paul in Gal. 3:15–18.

Reminiscent of Ex. 2:24; 6:4–5, Zechariah refers to Christ as the fulfillment of God's covenant oath to Abraham. Peter does as well, connecting it with the blessing of being turned to repentance. Paul, in parallel to what he does in Romans 4, contrasts the Lord's promise to Abraham in Genesis 15 with works. In all three the grace of God, along with His steadfast love and faithfulness, are highlighted.

Taken together, the synoptic and Pauline recounting of the Words of Our Lord on the night he was betrayed, (Matt. 26:28; Mark 14:24; Luke 22:20; 1 Cor. 11:25), provide the ultimate explanation and fulfilling of the promised new covenant. Luke and Paul both have, “the new covenant in my blood,” clearly connecting the new covenant with the Lord's Supper. Matthew alone includes the purpose and power of our Lord's blood, “for the forgiveness of sins.”

Where and when was the new covenant “cut”?

How does the Lord's Supper serve as a ceremony establishing the covenant and/or renewing the covenant?

CONFESSIONAL USAGE AND UNDERSTANDING OF THE WORD

The vast majority of the times *covenant* or *testament* occur in the *Book of Concord*, they are used either in quotation of the Words of Institution or to distinguish the Old Testament era from the New. A number of passages, however, are helpful to illustrate a Lutheran understanding and usage of the terms.⁵

⁵ Quotations are from Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, ed., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, trans. Charles Arand et al. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000).

the free forgiveness of sins. Moreover, they should receive it by faith, comfort their troubled conscience, and believe that these testimonies are not false ...”

The embrace of God’s solemn promises of steadfast love and faithfulness by faith taught in Gen. 15:6, and the New Testament passages which cite it, e.g. Romans 4 and Galatians 3, along with the chief character of the promised new covenant, the forgiveness of sins, are highlighted here.

From the Apology, Article XXVII, Monastic Vows, paragraph 20:

“... it is also an intolerable blasphemy when Thomas says that “the monastic profession is equal to baptism.” It is madness to put a human tradition, which has neither a command nor a promise of God, on the same level with an ordinance of Christ, which has both a command and a promise of God, and which contains a covenant of grace and eternal life.”

While the new covenant of forgiveness of sins in Christ’s blood is the ordinary focus, Holy Baptism is highlighted here as involving divine institution and promise and containing, “a covenant of grace and eternal life.” This helps to highlight the character of a covenant as established by God, containing His promises and conveying blessings which are received through faith.

From the Formula of Concord Solid Declaration, Article VII, Concerning the Holy Supper, paragraphs 50-53:

“Here, in the institution of *his last will and testament and this enduring covenant and agreement*, [Christ] did not use flowery language but rather the most appropriate, simple, unambiguous, and plain words. He also did so in all articles of faith and in every other institution of the *signs of his covenant and grace, or sacraments*, such as circumcision, the various sacrifices in the Old Testament, and Holy Baptism.

... the words of Luke and Paul, “This cup is the New Testament in my blood,” can have no other meaning than that which St. Matthew and Mark give [Matt. 26:28; Mark 14:24], “This (namely, what you are drinking through the mouth from this cup) is my blood of the New Testament, through which *I am establishing, sealing, and confirming this testament of mine, this new covenant of the forgiveness of sins, with you people.*” (italics added)

The three italicized phrases above provide a brief exposition of how we might use the terms “testament” and “covenant” together to convey the theology inherent in *berith* and *diatheke*. We might note also the Formula-tors’ identification of covenant/testament as relating to divine initiative for grace toward sinners.

TEACHING/PREACHING USAGE OF THE TERMS

The theological concept of covenant/testament provides rich ground for the proper application of Law and Gospel. On the Law side, the warnings of Gen. 17:14; Lev. 26:14–16; Joshua 7:11–12 make clear the LORD’s wrath toward all who break His covenant. The thunder of God’s Law toward those who disobey His word echoes clearly again and again.

The Gospel, however, is also clearly intrinsic to His covenants. For starters, the LORD’s covenants are based on His mercy and grace, not on any merits of the people. Steadfast love and faithfulness, as opposed to a legalistic and unforgiving demand for adherence to every minutia of the covenant stipulations, characterizes the LORD’s covenant relationships. See Deut. 7:7–9.

The passages listed above, as applications of the Law, make clear that God’s ultimate purpose in proclaiming doom

and destruction is that His people would return to Him so that he may have mercy on them (e.g. in Leviticus 26 compare vv. 14–39 with 40–45). Lutherans, in particular, should remember that it was Abram’s trust in the LORD’s covenant promises that were counted to him as righteousness (Gen. 15:6). The righteousness of faith, relying and depending on God’s promises fulfilled in Christ, is the covenant response He desires. The description of God being one “who keeps covenant and steadfast love (Hebrew *hesed*),” underlines the Gospel application of covenant, (c.f. Deut. 7:9; Neh. 1:5; 9:32; Dan. 9:4). The Servant Song of Isaiah 42 identifies the Servant of the LORD, our Lord Jesus, as the covenant: “I am the LORD; I have called you in righteousness; I will take you by the hand and keep you; I will give you as a covenant for the people, a light for the nations” (v. 6).

The use of *covenant* or *testament* in legal contexts in our society doesn't seem to create significant problems for our use of these words in preaching and teaching. The Covenant Theology embraced by various Reformed churches, however, is worth noting. In this theological framework, God entered into a *covenant of works* with Adam. By his sin Adam broke that covenant for himself and all his descendants. On the basis of an eternal *covenant of redemption* between God the Father and the Son concerning the salvation of mankind, a *covenant of grace* is available for the elect.^{6,7} *The Greater Westminster Catechism* reflects a slightly different formulation of this teaching.⁸ At least some expressions of this teaching tend toward legalism, displacing grace and mercy with the sovereignty of God and faith as an obligation rather than a divinely created response. Defining or understanding the covenants of Scripture as contracts

tends toward the same result. Contracts can exist without mercy, grace and love; biblical covenants cannot.

As a biblical way of expressing the relationship between God and sinners on whom He has had mercy, *covenant* and *testament* are words that can enrich our preaching and teaching of the mercy and grace of God in Jesus Christ. The LORD's covenants in the Old Testament as well as the promised New Covenant of Jeremiah 31, all fulfilled in Christ, highlight the LORD as "a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin" (Ex. 34:6–7). God bless you as you proclaim the LORD as a God who keeps covenant and steadfast love even when His people have earned His wrath.

DISCUSSION

1. What is the continuity or discontinuity between the covenants with Abraham or David and the New Covenant? What about the covenant of Sinai?
2. There has sometimes been disagreement in our Synod over the use of *covenant* versus *testament*, particularly with reference to the Lord's Supper. How might we best engage such disagreement, reflecting the usage of the Scriptures and our confessional documents as we seek to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace?
3. With regard to the proper distinction between Law and Gospel, which of these do you think the members of your congregation would consider the terms *covenant* and *testament* as most strongly conveying? Explain.
4. American Evangelicalism has long spoken of the necessity of having a personal *relationship* with Christ. Lutherans have often noted that relationship isn't a Scriptural term. Since a covenant lays out the relationship between two parties, how might the biblical theology of covenant provide an opportunity for gentle and respectful connection with and correction to the personal relationship theology common in American Christianity?

6 Summarized from the article on Covenant Theology in Elwell, Walter A., ed., *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984), 279–80.

7 For more on the covenant of redemption see the article by R.C. Sproul at ligonier.org/blog/what-covenant-redemption. He writes: "The covenant of redemption is a corollary to the doctrine of the Trinity. Like the word *trinity*, the Bible nowhere explicitly mentions it ... but the concept is heralded throughout. ... The Son entered into a sacred agreement with the Father. He submitted Himself to the obligations of that covenantal agreement. An obligation was likewise assumed by the Father — to give His Son a reward for doing the work of redemption. In his systematic theology, Charles Hodge lists eight promises the Father gave to the Son in this pact made in eternity. Briefly they are: that God would form a purified Church for His Son; that the Son would receive the Spirit without measure; that

He would be ever-present to support Him; that He would deliver Him from death and exalt Him to His right hand; that He would have the Holy Spirit to send to whom He willed; that all the Father gave to Him would come to Him and none of these be lost; that multitudes would partake of His redemption and His messianic kingdom; that He would see the travail of His soul and be satisfied

8 "Q. 30. Does God leave the whole human race to die in sin and misery? A. God does not leave the whole human race to die in the sin and misery that resulted from breaking the first covenant, ordinarily called the covenant of works. Merely from his love and mercy, God delivers his elect from sin and misery and brings them into salvation by means of the second covenant, ordinarily called the covenant of grace." (The Larger Westminster Catechism, epc.org/file/main-menu/resources/download-epc-doc/WCF-LC-ModernEnglish2011wChapters.pdf)

SUMMARY

From the covenant God made with Noah never again to strike down every living creature as he had done (Gen. 8:21), through the covenants with Abram and the children of Israel and David, to the New Covenant established in Jesus, the covenants of the LORD only ever had one ultimate goal and purpose: the redemption of the world. Even the warnings and threats of punishment for those breaking the covenant served the purpose of bringing sinners to turn again to the Lord for mercy in the Lamb of God who has taken away the sin of the world.



October 2016

Confession

Still More Words of Life for the Church and for the World
2016–17 LCMS Circuit Bible Studies

LEADER'S GUIDE

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FOCUS OF THE STUDY

When Jesus said, “Whoever confesses me before men, him will I also confess before my Father who is in heaven,” (Matt. 10:32 NKJV) He was not issuing an ultimatum. He was not saying, “Confess me — or else.” Rather He was describing the nature of faith; He was describing the attitude of the Christian. And He was attaching a beautiful promise to His description, a promise bringing great comfort to the one who confesses Him.

As we approach the celebration of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, we rejoice in the multitude of opportunities God has given to us in the Lutheran church to confess His name over this last half millennium. During these 500 years Lutherans have confessed in their hymns, their sermons, their speech, their lives and their symbols. In this Bible study we will look at four different aspects of what it means to be a confessing Christian:

1. The meaning of the word for “confess” in Matt. 10:32 and other places in Scripture.
2. The corporate confession of the Church. The individual confession of the Christian.
3. The Lutheran Confessions, i.e. the *Book of Concord*.
4. The promise to the confessing Christian.

In addition, throughout our study we will look at the Christocentric nature of the Christian confession. Jesus does not say in Matthew 10, “Whoever makes a confession ...” Rather, he says, “Whoever confesses Me ...”

SCRIPTURAL USAGE AND UNDERSTANDING OF THE WORD

When Jesus says, “Whoever confesses me before men, him will I also confess before my Father who is in heaven,” the Greek word translated “confess” is the word *ὁμολογέω*. Literally, it means to speak the same word. It could be translated, “to speak together,” “to speak the same language,” “to agree.” The translation I favor most frequently translates the word “confess.” The English Standard Version (ESV) translates the word *ὁμολογέω* as “acknowledge,” which is a particularly weak translation that does not render well the actual meaning of the word. However *ὁμολογέω* is translated, it should be remembered that the Greek word *ὁμολογέω* begins with the prefix *ὁμο* which is short for *ὁμοίος*, which means “same” or “together.” The confessing we do is the confession of the same thing, the same doctrine, the same faith, the same Lord, and we do it together. The English word “confess” comes from the Latin, “con fateor” which closely reflects the Greek. It means “to confess together.” Together we confess the same faith the Church has always confessed since, in Adam and Eve, God established the first congregation of believers when He gave them the promise of the Savior, created faith in their hearts, and founded the Church.

There are a number of other passages in which the word *ὁμολογέω* is used. Discuss the significance of its use in each of these passages and what the meaning is for the Christian’s life of confession: John 9:22; 12:42; Rom. 10:9-10; Heb. 3:1; 4:14; 1 John 4:2-3; 2 John 7.

The purpose of the foregoing study is to establish the intimate connection between faith and confession, and the fact that the Christian’s confession is an intrinsic aspect of his faith. In the past the words “witness” and “evangelism” have often been used in connection with the Christian’s individual confession. Unfortunately, for whatever reason, these words have scared some Christians and discouraged them from speaking about the Christian faith. How do we overcome this resistance? This question alone merits major discussion. Discuss how the use of “evangelism programs” may also have given some Christians the impression that the proclamation of the faith is a very difficult task for which only those who have studied are prepared.

CONFESSIONAL USAGE AND UNDERSTANDING OF THE WORD

Lutherans are particularly aware of the truth that the life of a Christian is a life of confession. The Lutheran church today celebrates the Festival of the Reformation on October 31, the day on which Martin Luther posted his 95 theses on the door of the Castle church in Wittenberg in 1517. Luther's response to the false teaching of his day was confession. It started with the very first of the 95 theses and has continued for 500 years. The Lutheran church began as a confessing church. And as you know well, Martin Luther was not the only confessor.

On June 25, 1530 the *Augsburg Confession* was presented to Charles V, emperor of the Holy Roman Empire. This was the first public confession produced by the Lutherans and subscribed by all Lutheran congregations. It was written by Philip Melancthon who had depended extensively on the writings of Martin Luther for its content. It was written to demonstrate that the Lutheran teaching was, simply put, the teaching of the Bible and of historic Christianity. And although it was a confession embraced only by the Lutherans at that time, it was nevertheless a confession for all Christians; in all its teachings, in everything it says, it is in complete agreement with the Scriptures, and it faithfully teaches the pure Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. The *Augsburg Confession* was in many parts rejected by the Church of Rome. This rejection led to another confession, the *Apology of the Augsburg Confession*. The *Apology* expanded upon the teachings of the *Augsburg Confession*, laying out at great length and with extreme clarity the scriptural teaching of justification by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. These two initial confessions were followed by the *Smalcald Articles*, further clarifying the Lutheran teaching of salvation by grace over against the false teachings of the Roman Church. Eventually, the *Formula of Concord* was written to clear up disagreements that arose among Lutherans after the death of Luther. These confessions, together with Luther's two catechisms and the three ecumenical creeds, were gathered together in 1580 into what we call the *Book of Concord*.

Every congregation of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, every pastor and every commissioned minister subscribes to this *Book of Concord*. Every called church worker says on the day of ordination or installation, “This is my confession.” What a wondrous treasure we have in this unity of confession!

And this treasure is even greater than at first might be imagined. In the LCMS we subscribe to the Lutheran Confessions in a very specific way. There are two ways in which one can state support for these Lutheran Confessions.

We have historically described these ways with two Latin words, *quia* and *quatenus*. *Quia* means because; *quatenus* means insofar as. Over the years there have been liberal Lutherans who have claimed that they subscribe to the Lutheran Confessions insofar as they agree with the Scriptures. At first glance this statement might sound pious. After all, we certainly would not want to confess anything as true that is in disagreement with the Scriptures. Unfortunately, this approach strongly implies that there are statements, maybe many statements, in the Lutheran Confessions that are not in agreement with the Bible. To these statements a person with a so-called *quatenus* subscription would not want to agree. But a *quatenus* subscription is really no subscription at all. After all, I can subscribe to the *Book of Mormon* insofar as it agrees with the Scriptures. I can subscribe to the Yellow Pages insofar as they agree with the Scriptures. I suppose I could even subscribe to the *Quran* insofar as it agrees with the Scriptures! To say, “I subscribe to the Lutheran Confessions insofar as they agree with the Scriptures” is actually to say, “I do not subscribe to the Lutheran Confessions.”

In all faithful Lutheran churches a *quia* subscription to the Lutheran Confessions has always been the practice. The Service of Ordination in our *Lutheran Service Book: Agenda* exemplifies a faithful Lutheran subscription to the *Book of Concord*. The question of subscription is not the only question asked of the man who is seeking ordination as a pastor. It follows immediately after questions about the pastor's commitment to the Scriptures and the Ecumenical Creeds. Here is the important question:

Do you confess the Unaltered Augsburg Confession to be a true exposition of Holy Scripture and a correct exhibition of the doctrine of the Evangelical Lutheran Church? And do you confess that the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, the Small and Large Catechisms of Martin Luther, the Smalcald Articles, the Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope, and the Formula of Concord—as these are contained in the Book of Concord—are also in agreement with this one scriptural faith?

The answer: “Yes, I make these Confessions my own **because** they are in accord with the Word of God.”

What a wonderful gift the Holy Spirit has given us in the unity of our confession! We are in agreement on the scriptural teaching of the Trinity. We are in agreement on the two natures in Christ, the human and the divine. We are in agreement on infant baptism and on the blessings that baptism brings, namely the gift of the Holy Spirit and the

forgiveness of sins. We are in agreement on our teaching on the Lord's Supper, namely that the bread and the wine are the body and blood of Jesus, the Son of God, that with them we receive the forgiveness of sins, and that where there is forgiveness of sins, there is also life and salvation. And we are in agreement that salvation is a gift of God received through faith in Jesus Christ without any merit or worthiness on our part. What a gift we have in this unity and in many other teachings contained in our Lutheran Confessions to which all our pastors, church workers and congregations subscribe. We do not subscribe to these confessions because their teachings happen to coincide with ours. We subscribe to them because their teachings are the teachings of the Bible. It was with this sentiment that the signers of the *Augsburg Confession* stated in the preface,

The desire was also expressed for deliberation on what might be done about the dissension concerning our holy faith and the Christian religion, and to this end it was proposed to employ all diligence amicable and charitable to hear, understand, and weigh the judgments, opinions, and beliefs of the several parties among us, to **unite the same in agreement on one Christian truth**, to put aside whatever may not have been rightly interpreted or treated by either side, **to have all of us embrace and adhere to a single, true religion** and life together in unity and in one fellowship and church, even as we are all enlisted under one Christ.¹

This Lutheran confessing began 500 years ago with the nailing of a document to the door of a church in Wittenberg.

¹ *The Book of Concord*, Theodore Tappert, ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959), 25. Subsequent references to this work will be abbreviated, Tappert.

That's half a millennium of confessing. And in this confessing, our Lutheran forebears followed the example of the martyrs and saints who went before them, men and women who confessed the truth — often in the face of severe persecution and even death. At times their confession was a bold and powerful one, at times it was rather quiet. But in one way or another they gave an answer concerning the hope that was in them. This hope centers in the person of Jesus — who He is and what He has done. He is the eternal Son of God who became incarnate for sinners, suffered and gave His life for them, and rose from death to conquer death, that all who believe in Him might be saved eternally.

Missouri Synod Lutherans consider themselves “confessional” Lutherans. This means more than simply providing a half-hearted lip service to the *Book of Concord*. It means that we actually confess these confessions as our own and that we believe, teach and confess what they do. Spend some time explaining why a *quia* confession does not place the *Book of Concord* on the same level as Scripture. Explain also that our commitment to the *Book of Concord* does not allow it to be simply placed on the level of all other books. Spend some time talking about the importance of having a clear and written confession. What shall we say about so-called nondenominational churches that wish to subscribe to no written confessions outside of Scripture?

TEACHING/PREACHING USAGE OF THE TERMS

The corporate confession of the church and the individual confession of the Christian.

THE CORPORATE CONFESSION OF THE CHURCH.

Discuss the role of the Divine Service as it pertains to confession, particularly in regard to confessing together or confessing the same thing. What role do the creeds play? The Propers? Does anything happen to the church's confession when uniformity in worship no longer prevails?

Divine Service settings 1-5 in *Lutheran Service Book* are all extremely Christocentric in their emphasis and proclamation. If you have time, go through one of them and note the centrality of the person of Jesus and the second article of the Apostles' Creed, and therefore how central the article of justification is, which according to our Lutheran Confessions is the chief article of the Christian faith. Do you find this same emphasis on the Gospel of forgiveness through faith in Jesus in all worship that calls itself Christian today? What happens to our confession if the focus is not on the person of Jesus and the Gospel message about Him

(John 5:23; 14:6)? Luther says, “For if the doctrine of justification is lost, the whole of Christian doctrine is lost.”² Again Luther says, “if we lose the doctrine of justification, we lose everything.”³ If Luther is correct, shouldn’t we all be concerned with the entire worship of the church, namely the liturgy, the hymns, the preaching, the prayers etc.?

THE INDIVIDUAL’S CONFESSION OF THE FAITH.

It is important that each individual Christian confess the faith. The Holy Spirit through the Word breathes into that which is by nature dead, you and me, and creates life. It is only natural that that which was dead but is now alive should breathe out that which was breathed into it, namely the life-giving confession of Christ, the Son of the living God. It is this Word that has brought us to life; it is therefore this Word we who now live wish to utter. Therefore, in both the Apostles’ and the Nicene Creed, each confessor declares, “I believe ...” At the same time, when these creeds are recited in the divine service, in a family devotion, or by any group of Christians, the corporate nature of the church is made clear. Just as there is an intimate connection between faith in Jesus as Savior and salvation, so there is also an intimate connection between faith in Jesus and the confession of the faith (Rom. 10:9-10). But the faith confessed is always the confession of the church catholic, never simply the individual believer’s feelings or opinions.

Thus, an individual Christian’s confession is at the same time uniquely his own and that of the entire Church. Matthew 16:13-19 provides a powerful example of the essential concord between the confession of an individual Christian and that of the Church. Jesus asks His disciples who they say that He is. Peter answers, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matt. 16:16). Undoubtedly, this was Peter’s individual and very personal confession. Yet, Jesus describes this confession of Peter as the rock on which He would build His church. Peter’s individual confession and the confession of the Church coincide. The individual’s and the Church’s confession are to be the same.

Thus, as soon as a person’s confession differs from that of the Church catholic, it is no longer a Christian confession. In this age of selfies, entitlement, individualism and increasing narcissism, it is essential for Christians to understand the corporate nature of the Christian faith. This emphasis on the corporate nature of the Christian faith reveals that the content of the faith is the same for everyone and never changes. As Christians, we do not exult in the variety of beliefs among us. Rather, we rejoice in the unity

of belief that we have, a unity in doctrine and in confession. Thus Paul writes, “There is one body and one Spirit — just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call — one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all, and through all, and in all” (Eph. 4:4-6). Contrary to what many believe today, we are not each entitled to his own “truth.” Jesus says, “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples. And you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8:31-32). Although an individual Christian may confess something false, the degree to which his confession departs from Scripture is to the same degree a departure from Christianity and from Christianity’s common confession. Unity in the faith is not a unity of emotion, alleged togetherness, common values or heritage. It is a unity in the truths of Scripture. And regardless of a person’s sincerity, a departure from Scripture is a departure from the common confession of the faith.

This unity in faith that all Christians share, a unity that results in a common confession, does not in any way diminish the value of the individual’s faith. It is about the faith of an individual that Luther writes when he declares,

Faith, however, is a divine work within us. It transforms us and gives us a new birth wrought by God (John 1:13). It slays the old Adam, makes us entirely different people in heart, spirit, mind and all powers, and brings with it the Holy Spirit. Oh, a living, energetic, active, mighty thing is this faith. It is impossible for it not to do good incessantly. Nor does it ask whether good works are to be done; but before the question is put it has already done them and is forever doing them. He, however, who does not perform such works is a man without faith, who gropes and looks about for faith and good works and knows neither what faith is nor what good works are, although he prates and prattles much about faith and good works.

Faith is a living, daring confidence in the grace of God. It is so certain that a man would die for it a thousand times over. This confidence and knowledge of divine grace makes a person happy, bold and of high spirits in his relation to God and all His creatures.⁴

The faith in every individual Christian is a powerful and precious work of God — and will it not produce a confession from everyone who possesses such faith? The confession may be a quiet one; it may not be eloquent; it may be verbal or a confession in deed; it may be joining in the Apostles’ Creed with the rest of God’s people; it may be sung with the congregation in one of our hymns; it

² *Luther’s Works*, Jaroslav Pelikan, ed. (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1963), 26:9.
³ *Ibid*, 26.

⁴ *What Luther Says*, Ewald M. Plass, ed. (St. Louis: Concordia, 1986), 498.

may be standing up to the temptations of peers; it may be encouraging a co-worker who is going through difficulties; it may be teaching one's own children; it may be teaching the children of others. The form of our confession may depend on our vocation. Mothers, fathers, teachers, doctors, farmers, executives, no matter what vocations we have, the light cannot be placed under a basket but on a lampstand (Matt. 5:15). And we who are Christians will confess in a variety of ways and into a variety of circumstances. After all, we have been built on the rock and we know that none of the winds or storms of this life can cause us to fall (Matt. 7:24-27). Thus, no matter when or where we live, we confess. The grace of God leads us to confess. As Friedrich Wynek-en said in his 1857 Synod Address, "May our gracious and merciful God in these sorrowful times so fill us with His grace that under threats and persecutions – indeed, in the face of death itself — we may joyfully cry out, 'We cannot but speak what we have seen and heard.'"⁵

May God give us also wisdom, faithfulness and courage to confess in an age and a country desperately in need of a clear proclamation of God's grace in Christ the Savior of all the world.

We have dealt with the corporate confession of the Church and the individual confession of the Christian for a couple of reasons. One is to demonstrate that, as far as the content of the confession goes, these confessions do not differ from each other. Christians do not have their own individual confessions of the faith. This is not to say that all Christians have the same experiences. This is not to say that Christians will not have different starting points to express their convictions or that they will not have different emphases as they explain why they believe what they do. At the same time, it doesn't do me much good to hear from someone that he used to smoke and drink and now does not, especially, if I don't smoke or drink, or if I happen to believe it is perfectly fine to smoke and drink. The point is, if a person's testimony or witness becomes too personal, it can become fairly irrelevant to the hearer. That confession which is common to the entire Church, however, is never irrelevant. It could be a healthy discussion to look at how we go about confessing our faith in our daily lives in such a way that it is both personal and truly edifying and Christian.

CHRIST'S PROMISE TO THE CONFESSING CHRISTIAN.

Jesus says, "Whoever confesses me before men, him will I confess before my Father who is in heaven." "Him will I confess." As I was preparing a sermon a number of months ago, I was read these words of Jesus and they hit me with great impact. "Him will I confess." One day I will stand before the judgment seat of God and my Savior Jesus is going to confess me before the Father! He is going to point to me and say, "Father, this is one of Your dear children. He confessed me before men; I confess him now before You. Receive him into the kingdom which You prepared for him before the world began." And the Father will look at me and He will say, "Come. I cannot refuse him whom my Son confesses. So, come, enter the place my Son has prepared for you. Come, receive your inheritance." This is what you and I look forward to as the Last Day approaches. It will be the day on which Jesus confesses you and me to the Father.

What joy to know, when life is past,

The Lord we love is first and last,

The end and the beginning!

He will one day, oh, glorious grace,

Transport us to that happy place

Beyond all tears and sinning!

Amen! Amen!

Come Lord Jesus!

Crown of gladness!

We are yearning

For the day of your returning!⁶

And on that day He will confess you before the Father. Luther writes about this text in Matthew,

Who would not be afire and for joy desire not only to confess but even to die confessing Christ? These things which Christ here speaks to comfort His own are priceless, for He knows our infirmity and the intensity of persecution in the world from our flesh and from the devil. Against this distress, therefore, He sets Himself in all his majesty and boasts that He Himself is the one who preaches us, that His Father and the angels are the audience, and that heaven is the place, or church, where He preaches.⁷

⁵ *At Home in the House of My Fathers*, Matthew Harrison, ed. (St. Louis: Concordia, 2009), 416.

⁶ *Lutheran Service Book*, (St. Louis: Concordia, 2006), 395:6. Subsequent references to this work will be abbreviated, *LSB*.

⁷ *Luther's Works*, Christopher Boyd Brown, ed. (St. Louis: Concordia, 2015),

What a marvelous explanation of the text Luther provides. We preach Jesus to everyone on earth and He preaches us to everyone in Heaven. On the last day Jesus will confess you and me to the Father in Heaven and to the angels. But He confesses us even now. He is a mediator. This is what He does. “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34). He pleads from the cross for those who have sinned against Him. He pleads for us also, for us who have sinned against Him. The book of Hebrews says, “he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them” (Heb. 7:25). See also Rom. 8:26-27, 34.

At times people depict the act of confession as an obligation. When it comes to the confession of our sins, this is certainly true. See 1 John 1:8-10. But when it comes to confessing our Savior, it is more of a privilege and a joy than it is an obligation. When we see what a great salvation our Savior has worked for us, how greatly He has suffered, how much He has forgiven, how powerfully He has conquered our enemies, how completely He has loved us, we join together with Peter and John and exclaim, “We cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:20). And together we pray to our God of grace:

Give us lips to sing Thy glory,
Tongues Thy mercy to proclaim,
Throats that shout the hope that fills us,
Mouths to speak Thy holy name.

Alleluia, alleluia!

May the light which Thou dost send

Fill our songs with alleluias,

Alleluias without end!⁸ Amen.

The Gospel tells us what God has done for us through His only Son our Savior Jesus Christ. But the message about what Jesus is doing for us even now is also Gospel. And the message of what He will say about you and me on the last day is Gospel. In acting as our intermediary and advocate, Jesus reaffirms the absolution pronounced upon us by His Father when He rose from the dead. Discuss the unconditional nature of the Gospel. Discuss the problems that arise when conditions are attached to the message of forgiveness. The Gospel is difficult for humans to believe. It runs counter to our natural work-righteousness. But if Jesus confesses me before the Father in heaven and before the angels, surely all fears and doubts must evaporate. Will He confess us, only then to damn us? Of course not! In His confession of us He attributes to us all of His righteousness and holiness and in essence says to the Father, “Look how pure they are; look how holy they are; look at them; they are perfect; they are spotless; they are clean in every way.” And the Father says, “Yes, it is true, for Your sake, My Son.” This is pure Gospel meant to comfort and assure the Christian.

⁸ LSB, 578:5.

DISCUSSION

1. Is the confession of the faith natural to the Christian? Consider Rom. 7:19-25. Also Matt. 5:13-16. Do all Christians confess the faith?
2. Do all Christians make the same confession? See 1 Cor. 1:10. Also Phil. 1:27. If so, how do we account for differences in teaching among Christian denominations? Are these differences simply a matter of interpretation?
3. The Lutheran Confessions (*The Book of Concord*) are relevant to the church’s confession today. Can we still say, as the Lutheran confessors did in 1580, “...We are minded by the grace of the Holy Spirit to abide and remain unanimously in this confession of faith and to

regulate all religious controversies and their explanations according to it.”⁹

4. When Jesus says He will confess us before His Father who is in Heaven, how is this promise a proclamation of the Gospel?

⁹ Tappert, 14.



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Koinonia

Still More Words of Life for the Church and for the World
2016–17 LCMS Circuit Bible Studies

LEADER'S GUIDE

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FOCUS OF THE STUDY

Fellowship is a word we use often in church. We gather in fellowship halls. We have fellowship committees and activities. We say we enjoyed good Christian fellowship at social get-togethers.

However, the word fellowship has a deeper meaning than this in the Scriptures and in Lutheran theology. While the English word “fellowship” makes us think of friendship or sociability, the Greek word “koinonia” has to do with sharing something in common with others. The something that we have “koinonia” with is what brings unity or fellowship. What Christians share in common is Christ Himself. The fellowship of the New Testament is a divine matter. Through the Gospel, we have union with Christ and through Him, with the Father. It is this union with Christ which brings individual Christians into union with one another. This is not something we as sinners can create or maintain on our own. New Testament koinonia is not brought into being by potlucks or social functions, as

important as these things are. God unites the Church by joining us to Christ through the Gospel and Sacraments. This koinonia is not a static intellectual matter. It is a living active union of Christians in the Body of Christ. It shows itself in real actions of love and outreach.

It is this fellowship we want to look at in this study.

Discussion questions

1. When you hear the word “fellowship” what is the first thing you think of?
2. How do those associations color your thinking of the word when we use it in church?
3. How do you think our parishioners understand the word?

SCRIPTURAL USAGE AND UNDERSTANDING OF THE WORD

The word “koinonia” is a rich New Testament word that goes to the heart of living together in the Church. Again and again we see how the life we live in the Church is a divine gift that we experience together. This divine life is also sustained by that same God through the gift of His presence and Word in our midst.

Read Acts 2:41–47.

In this passage, St. Luke describes the life of the Church in the first days after Pentecost. It is a “blueprint” of how the Church lives in every time and place.

1. What does St. Luke say the believers devoted themselves to in verse 42?
2. Which item is listed first? Is this order important?
3. How does the apostles’ teaching (didache) relate to other items on the list?

The apostles’ teaching is the Gospel, the New Testament doctrine. That teaching is the basis of our fellowship together. Through the Gospel we are joined to Christ and through Him, we are joined to one another.

St. Luke mentions next that the Church devoted itself to the fellowship. This koinonia is the fruit of hearing the Gospel, the apostolic teaching. This union with Christ and with one another shows itself chiefly in the Divine Service. We are gathered by the Father in Christ and so we gather in Christ’s name in the service to hear the Gospel and to receive His gifts.

4. What is the next item on the list?
5. How does the breaking of bread follow from the first two items?
6. Do you think this is a reference to the Lord’s Supper?

Scholars and interpreters disagree whether this verse is pointing to Holy Communion. It may be a meal or the Supper or both. For the purposes of our study it seems likely that the Lord’s Supper is at least partly in view. The koinonia created by God’s acting to join us to Christ through His Word is seen most clearly when we gather at the altar, receive His body and blood and are all joined as one. Other New Testament passages clearly teach that the fellowship of the New Testament is one experienced, given and shown forth at the Eucharist.

Read 1 John 1:1–4.

7. How do verses 1–2 describe the Gospel?
8. What is it that has been heard and seen and touched?
9. How does this relate to our fellowship together?

This language of concrete physicality refers us to the Incarnation, the Word taking flesh. The reality of Jesus' work and life among us is the basis for our fellowship with God. While fellowship can seem like an invisible or "spiritual" thing it is based on the reality of Christ's incarnation and His bodily work on the cross for us.

What John and the apostles have seen and heard is then proclaimed to the Church in verse 2. Christ has done His work but that work must be proclaimed so that sinners hear and believe it.

10. What results from this proclamation in verse 3?
11. With whom do the hearers have fellowship?

There is a progression of fellowship laid out in this verse. First, John says that the hearers have fellowship with "us," the proclaimers of the Gospel. But this fellowship extends through them as messengers to the Father Himself and Jesus Christ. This illustrates the truth that there is both a human and a divine dimension to the fellowship of the Church. We are in union with one another when we agree in the Gospel. But that agreement and connection is ultimately with God Himself who is active in His Word, gathering His people to Himself.

Read 1 John 1:5–7.

12. What does St. John say can contradict our fellowship together?
13. What are some ways we and our congregations "walk in darkness"?
14. St. John says if we walk in the light we have fellowship with one another. How do we walk in the light?

15. How does the next phrase (the blood of his Son Jesus cleanses us from all sin) fit in here?

We do not have fellowship with one another by our good works, how we act, how well we carry out our pastoral vocation or how energetic our congregation is. The blood of Jesus binds us as one in Himself by forgiving our sins. Walking in the light means first of all walking in the forgiveness and mercy of Christ. Then, as a result of that cleansing and union with Him, our deeds and actions express that fellowship we have in acts of love and compassion to our neighbors.

Read 1 Cor. 1:9–10.

16. What does verse 9 indicate our fellowship is in?

17. What results from this in verse 10?

Fellowship/koinona is a sharing in something. Here the fellowship is in Jesus Christ. The Church is not a voluntary association of individuals but a "having been joined together in Christ by the Holy Spirit" communion. What results then is agreement in Christ with no divisions since we are all one in Christ's body.

Read 1 Cor. 10:16–17.

The word translated as "participation" here in the ESV is koinonia.

18. What is our koinonia centered on in this verse?
19. What does this verse teach us about what happens in the Lord's Supper?
20. How is the Lord's Supper related to our fellowship in Christ?

Partaking of the Supper is an indication of our fellowship in Christ. The oneness of our koinonia in our Savior is reflected in our sharing Him in the Eucharist. The two things go together. We cannot display a unity in the Supper which does not exist in our beliefs and confession concerning Christ Himself.

CONFESSIONAL USAGE AND UNDERSTANDING OF "KOINONIA"

The Lutheran Confessions tackle the concept of fellowship when looking at the definition of the Church. Over against the Roman Catholics who had located the Church in the hierarchy of bishops, culminating in the Pope, the Augsburg Confession pinpointed the Church to be the place where the Word and Sacraments are rightly taught and distributed. In other words, the Church is a fellowship of the Gospel, a sharing in the preaching of the Word and Sacraments that give eternal life (AC VII).¹

The Apology goes further to say that the Church is “not only the fellowship of outward objects and rites, as other governments, but at its core, it is a fellowship of faith and of the Holy Spirit in hearts” (AP VII and VIII, 5). The Apology is clear that the Church is precisely a *koinonia* of faith in Christ. Fellowship, then, is not simply a quality or an aspect of the Church but is the very definition of the Church. However, the Church is not some invisible thing

that cannot be located. The Apology continues, “Yet this fellowship has outward marks so that it can be recognized. These marks are the pure doctrine of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments in accordance with the Gospel of Christ” (AP VII and VIII, 5). So this fellowship in Christ and his Gospel is created and anchored in the marks of the Church which are tangible and locatable. Our *koinonia* is not “spiritual” in the sense that it is completely ethereal and has no shape or foundation in our lives in the Church. Kurt Marquart has summarized this relationship between the inward fellowship and outward marks of the Church by saying that the outward rites of the Church are “powerful, faith-creating means of grace which really convey forgiveness, life and salvation. Without them, therefore, there can be no ‘fellowship of faith and of the Holy Spirit in the heart’ at all.”²

TEACHING/PREACHING USAGE OF "FELLOWSHIP/KOINONIA"

1. Read Phil. 1:3–7. What is translated “partnership” in the Gospel is “*koinonia*” in the Gospel. Paul and his hearers in Philippi share a fellowship in Christ. They are united in Christ.

What do you think this *koinonia* consisted of?

What things did Paul mention that he and Philippians shared?

What encouragement was this for Paul?

Because the Philippians and St. Paul were joined in Christ through the Gospel they shared their experiences as one body. St. Paul holds them in his heart. His defense of the Gospel and his imprisonment are partaken of also by the Philippians.

2. Often our understanding of the word “fellowship” is a human one. If we are nice to another, or if we do

the right things, we can create fellowship or make the Church more united.

What is the difference between these kinds of thoughts and the fellowship we have seen in the Bible passages so far?

What is the connection between “human fellowship” and the divine fellowship we enjoy in Christ?

True *koinonia* is given by God through the Holy Spirit through faith in Christ. We cannot create that or make it happen. However, there are many things we can do to express the joy and happiness that results from being joined as one in Christ. Fellowship events and human gatherings can be times where the unity and bond of faith are lived out in mutual conversation, support and celebration.

¹ The quotations from the Lutheran Confessions are from *Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions*, second edition; edited by Paul McCain, et al., copyright© 2006 Concordia Publishing House. All rights reserved.

² Kurt Marquart, *The Church and Her Fellowship, Ministry, and Governance* (Fort Wayne, Ind.: International Foundation for Lutheran Confessional Research, 1990) 24.

3. Read 1 Cor. 12:12–26.

How does the image of the Church as the Body of Christ illustrate the fellowship we share?

How does this fellowship show itself in times of distress or persecution or difficulty?

4. Read Gal. 2:1–11. This chapter shows a time of disagreement and controversy in the Church. Eventually James, Peter and John extend the right hand of fellowship to St. Paul.

What does this phrase mean?

The right hand of fellowship means they were agreed in the doctrine of Christ and lived it out in oneness.

What is the basis for the extending fellowship to fellow Christians or church bodies on the Synod level?

Fellowship is extended through the same measure as the apostles demonstrated: agreement in the Biblical doctrine.

How does this passage from Galatians 2 teach us about how we go about resolving doctrinal disagreements in the Church?

We resolve doctrinal disagreements by working toward unity on the basis of the Word of God.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How does the Scriptural picture of fellowship in the Church compare with our congregational life?

How do we express our oneness as the Body of Christ on the local level, in our congregations?

How can we improve our understanding and practice of the koinonia we share?

2. How about on the circuit level: How well are we expressing our fellowship between churches?

How about as clergy? How can we, as the clergy, better put into practice the unity that we share in Christ and the Gospel?

3. Unity among those who profess faith in Christ comes from God Himself and the work He does in Baptism.

“There is one body and one Spirit — just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call — one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.” (Eph. 4:4–6) Yet there are many denominations. This is nothing new. Even in the apostolic age there were divisions. Yet those churches that accepted the apostles’ teaching (Acts 2:42) were united in the one faith.

How do we relate to other Christians who disagree with us in doctrine?

What should be our attitude towards them?

How can we best teach our congregations about the truth of divisions among Christians?

SUMMARY

The fellowship of Christians in the Church is a marvelous gift of God. It is easy to take it for granted or to ignore it altogether. It is also easy to wreck that oneness with selfishness or a desire to make the Church into our own creation. God calls us to rejoice in the unity that Christ has brought about by His sacrifice on the cross. The preaching of the Gospel and the Sacraments of the New Testament

bring that redemption to us, God’s people. The unity we have in the Gospel ought to be celebrated! But most of all we are called to praise God for the unity we have with Him through Christ and the oneness we share with one another. Let us end this study with this benediction: “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all” (2 Cor. 13:14).



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Preach

Still More Words of Life for the Church and for the World
2016–17 LCMS Circuit Bible Studies

LEADER'S GUIDE

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Moreover, if we must speak about outward appearances, attendance in our churches is greater than among the opponents'. Practical and clear sermons hold an audience. But neither the people nor the theologians have ever understood the opponents' teaching. The true adornment of the churches is godly, useful, and clear doctrine, the devout use of sacraments, ardent prayer, and the like. (AP XXIV:50)¹

Good preaching, says the Apology, consists of practical and clear sermons with godly doctrine that is clear and useful. This is written immediately in contrast to the abuses of the Mass, with its attendant false teaching and man-made laws. In our present pragmatic age, what many regard as useful

preaching may be a far cry from what the Apology intends: too often, a useful sermon is interpreted as one that gives people something they can use, something they can *do*, to improve their daily lives. In fact, some will advocate exactly that as the goal of preaching.

What, however, does the Lord say of preaching? How does it fit into the pastor's calling and the Office of the Keys? What makes a practical, useful and effective sermon in the eyes of the Lord? Scriptural preaching is, and always has been, focused upon Jesus Christ and Him crucified for our sins.

SCRIPTURAL USAGE AND UNDERSTANDING OF THE WORD (OT/NT)

The preacher is the κήρυξ in Greek, the word for "herald" in secular literature. Heralds delivered messages of their kings with royal authority. They also served as criers who went before notable individuals and prepared the way: thus Joseph (Gen. 41:43) and Mordecai (Esther 6:11) are led through the streets by those who cry out their praises, and John the Baptist prepares the way of the Lord (Matt. 3:3). The noun κήρυξ is used sparingly throughout Scripture, appearing in some form only six times in the LXX and NT combined: the emphasis is far less on the preacher, and far more on the preaching.

Hebrew does not have a close correspondent to κηρύσσω; the most commonly used equivalent is קָרָא, "to call."² Delightfully within its semantic domain is naming, as when God gives names to created things in Genesis 1. Among the prophets, it describes the proclamation of Jonah (Jonah 3:4), Jeremiah (Jer. 2:2), Joel (Joel 3:9) and former prophets (Zech. 7:7).

For the purposes of this short study, Is. 40:1–5 is a significant bridge between the Old and New Testaments. The Lord commands, "Comfort, comfort my people"

by speaking to them of pardon; and the LXX's use of παρακαλεῖτε reminds us the Paraclete's role in this proclamation (John 15:26; 16:7–11). In Is. 40:3, "A voice cries: (κῆρυξ) 'In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD.'" This prophecy of John the Baptist connects his work to the Old Testament prophets in pointing to Jesus by their preaching.

The content of John's preparatory preaching is summed up in Matt. 3:1–2: "In those days John the Baptist came preaching (κηρύσσων) in the wilderness of Judea, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.'" John calls for sinners to turn from sin and self-righteousness as Jesus is about to make Himself known. Once manifested as God's Son at His baptism, Jesus continues preaching the same message: "From that time Jesus began to preach (κηρύσσειν), saying, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand'" (Matt. 4:17); it is important to note that this is described as "the gospel of God" in Mark 1:14–15. This is *the* message that Jesus Himself proclaims and gives to His Church to proclaim.

Preaching is central to the ministry of Jesus. It exceeds miracles in importance, as Jesus Himself declares in Luke 4:43. His work of preaching does not end with His death: He preaches to the spirits in prison when He descends into hell (1 Peter 3:19). Following His resurrection, He sends his apostles to proclaim the Gospel of "repentance and forgiveness of sins" (Luke 24:47; cf. Mark 16:15). Once again, preaching is central to His ongoing work of salvation:

¹ All quotes from the Lutheran Confessions in this study are from: Kolb, Robert and Timothy J. Wengert. *The Book of Concord*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000.

² TDNT III:700 (Full citation: Friedrich, Gerhard. "κηρύσσω." *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, Vol. III, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965, 700).

“How are they to hear without someone preaching? ... So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ” (Rom. 10:14, 17).

The goal of preaching throughout Scripture, then, is repentance and faith in Jesus. The goal is certainly not an exhortation to keep the Law unto self-righteousness, because it is impossible to please God apart from Christ. Though a competent and interesting presentation is preferred, the goal of preaching is not an exhibition of rhetorical skill, as Paul makes clear in 2 Cor. 11:4–6. And though one hopes that a sermon is informative and adds knowledge to hearers, an increase in knowledge is not the primary goal: if hearers

leave a sermon knowing nothing new, but trusting that they are forgiven by Jesus present in the Word, the primary goal of preaching is accomplished.

In a way, a scriptural approach to preaching is very simple. In the words of Peter and John, “We cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:20): this is serving as a witness in the purest sense of the word. The preacher simply says what he has heard from the Lord in His holy Word. He is responsible for the message, not the outcome: the preacher plants and waters, but God gives the growth (1 Cor. 3:6; cf. Is. 55:10–11).

CONFSSIONAL USAGE AND UNDERSTANDING OF THE WORD

References to preaching are scattered throughout the Lutheran Confessions; and where it is mentioned, one can expect to find the words “repentance” or “gospel” often near at hand. The Confessions faithfully embrace preaching as our Lord defines it in Scripture. The Apology helpfully summarizes:

“The sum of the preaching of the gospel is to condemn sin and to offer the forgiveness of sins, righteousness on account of Christ, the Holy Spirit, and eternal life, so that having been reborn we might do good. Christ includes this in a summary of the gospel when he says in the last chapter of Luke [24:47] ‘that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in [my] name to all nations.’” AP XII:29

The goal of preaching is repentance and the forgiveness of sins. This is the work of the Holy Spirit, who effects conversion through the preaching and hearing of the Word (FC EP II:4). The proclamation of the Law is important, but insufficient: it is also necessary to add the Gospel, for only by the Gospel are sins forgiven. The Gospel to be proclaimed is the freight of the Second Article of the Creed (LC II:33): if one merely preaches select teachings or the miracles of Jesus but excludes His death and resurrection, he has not proclaimed the Gospel. To exclude the Gospel

from preaching is to exclude Christ from preaching; and where Christ is absent, there is no forgiveness of sins (LC II:45). Furthermore, one cannot keep the Law or please God without faith. Where there is no forgiveness, there is no faith (AP IV:252–257); and our Lord declares, “Apart from me, you can do nothing” (John 15:5).

Preaching is an exercise of the Office of the Keys: it is given to forgive and retain sins (AC XXVIII:5–6). This office is about eternal things, not temporal things, for the Gospel is the power of salvation for all who believe (Rom. 1:16; AC XXVIII:9). Once again, preaching is not foremost about imparting knowledge, nor is it a call to action. Preaching in the stead and by the command of Christ brings forgiveness to the hearer by bringing the hearer into the presence of Jesus. It is a message of foolishness to the unbeliever; “but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1 Cor. 1:24; cf. AP IV:230).

The Confessions make little comment on style and presentation, except to indicate that the preacher should take his audience into account. Erudition is fine for a learned group (SC Preface 9), but “baby talk” is better for young children (LC I:77).

TEACHING/PREACHING USAGE OF THE WORD

If faith comes by hearing, it is no surprise that the devil will do everything to oppose the preaching of the Gospel, and pastors will face no shortage of temptations. Sometimes it comes in the form of pressure or persecution from the state (Acts 4:18); sometimes, it is the popular demands of itching ears in society (1 Tim. 4:3–4), which might be more amenable to windy sermons about wine and strong drink (Micah 2:11). There will also be the temptation to a feeling of futility, since the preaching of “Christ crucified” is scandalous foolishness to the world, and we would like to be regarded as wise and significant (1 Cor. 1:22–24). One can find plenty of experts within Christendom today who will argue that the primary purpose of the sermon is not to preach the foolishness of the Gospel for faith and salvation, but foremost to increase knowledge and to motivate to Christ-like action. Too, a pastor can be tempted to delight more in his oratorical skill and style than the content of the message.

Against these temptations, Paul’s counsel to Timothy still holds true: “Preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching” (2 Tim. 4:2). Again, this is done by “telling what we have seen and heard.” As participants in this study have time, it is instructive to review the apostolic discourses in the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 2:14–39; 3:12–26; 4:8–12; 7:1–53; 10:35–43; 11:5–18; 13:17–41; 17:22–31; 20:18–35; 22:3–21; 24:10–21; 26:2–29; 28:23–28): the Apostles clearly act as witnesses, relaying Law and Gospel appropriately to their hearers, trusting that the God’s word will do the work.

One will also note that the Apostles’ proclamation was met with mixed results, ranging from the numerous baptisms of Pentecost to imprisonment. The measure of preaching is not the visible result, but faithfulness to the Word of God. The proclamation of the Gospel bestows faith and brings hearers into fellowship with Jesus Christ: this success is known by faith, not by sight.

DISCUSSION

1. Evaluate the following statement: a preacher may add nothing to the efficacy of God’s Word, but should take care not to distract from it. What might be some of those distractions, and how might they be avoided?

Answers will vary, but may include an abundance of extracurricular material that overwhelms the sermon or distorts the text; or the pastor’s presentation, which may exhibit pride in rhetorical skill or poor speaking abilities. Artisans typically continue to study and improve their skills; not to their credit, pastors rarely work on improving their preaching abilities once they have left the seminary. The goal of continued improvement is not, of course, to “sell” the Gospel better; but to present the Word of God as clearly as possible, and to share winsomely and boldly the whole counsel of God with their hearers (Acts 20:27). (If hearers are to be offended by preaching, let them be offended by God’s truth, not the quirks of the preacher!)

2. Every preacher is pressured to change the message away from Scripture in order accommodate hearers. What pressures do you face in your congregation, circuit,

district and synod? Are there “untouchable” topics within the congregation that require special skill in addressing?

Answers will vary. The purpose of this question is hopefully to encourage mutual conversation, consolation and counsel among the brothers gathered.

3. In the explanation to the 3rd Commandment, Martin Luther writes, “We should fear and love God that we may not despise preaching and His Word, but hold it sacred and gladly hear and learn it.” What does it mean to despise preaching, and what is the consequence?

The Catechism’s explanation assumes that the preaching is in agreement with Scripture. Luther warns in the Large Catechism that one breaks this commandment by listening to the sermon “as they would to any other entertainment” or by going to listen only out of habit (LC I:96). Beyond the outward contempt is a far more serious sin, however: to despise preaching then is to despise the proclamation of Christ crucified and risen (and present to forgive), and thus to reject the forgiveness of sins.

4. Is there a difference in the content and purpose of teaching a Bible class and preaching a sermon?

The primary goal of teaching the Word of God in Bible class is to increase knowledge of Scripture, while the goal of the sermon is to impart forgiveness and faith. First and foremost, the sermon is effectively an extended absolution. The two are not mutually exclusive, of course: wherever the Word is, the Holy Spirit is at work to bestow God's gifts of knowledge and faith.

5. Given that the success of a sermon is known by faith, not sight, how might a pastor measure his preaching to determine if he is faithfully proclaiming the Word of God?

In addition to measuring his own sermons against God's Word, the mutual conversation and consolation of the brethren can be of immense help here. Depending upon the make-up of those gathered, a Winkel could be a fine environment for homiletical critique.

SUMMARY

We began this study with a quote from the Apology about "practical and clear sermons." Just a couple of sentences above that quote is this one:

"Due to God's blessing, our priests attend to the ministry of the Word. They teach the Gospel about the blessings of Christ, and they show that the forgiveness of sins takes place on account of Christ. This teaching offers solid consolation to consciences. In addition, they teach about the

good works that God commands, and they speak about the value and use of the sacraments." AP XXIV: 48

This is the Lutheran summary of a clear and practical sermon: through preaching by those who are weak, fearful and trembling (1 Cor. 2:3), the crucified and risen Lord visits His people with the forgiveness of sins. God grant to His pastors every good gift to preach the Word in season and out of season, for by it He gathers and nurtures His people.



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Sacrament

Still More Words of Life for the Church and for the World
2016–17 LCMS Circuit Bible Studies

LEADER'S GUIDE

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FOCUS

Among Lutherans, the phrase “Word and Sacrament” is almost cliché. By it, we mean the two parts of the Divine Service, namely the preached Word and the Lord’s Supper (Sacrament of the Altar) or the means by which God deals with us graciously in Christ — the preached and written Word, Baptism, Absolution and the Lord’s Supper. The focus of this study will be on the words “sacrament” (Latin: *sacramentum*) and the word that lies behind it — “mystery” (Greek: μυστήριον).

In the Latin West, from which comes our dogmatic language, *sacramentum* is the substitute word for μυστήριον. The apologist Tertullian was the first to use *sacramentum* in reference to Baptism as a rite of initiation into the Christian faith. By the close of the second century, *sacramentum* became a functional synonym for μυστήριον in Latin Christianity. The West may have been reluctant to use the term μυστήριον because of its cultic use in the surrounding culture, being concerned that Christian worship would be viewed analogously with the “mystery cults,” and the Christian sacramental rites as a kind of ritual magic or secret knowledge.

Sacramentum is a word borrowed from the Roman civic life. It originally referred to the money deposited by parties to a law suit and later to the military oath of newly enlisted troops. The common thread in all its uses is the notion of “sacred obligation or engagement.”¹ This fit in nicely with the “militia Christi” metaphor employed by the Early Church writers for Christian initiation. In Baptism, one became a soldier of Christ the Crucified One, and received

upon the brow the mark of the cross in the same way that a soldier of Caesar bore Caesar’s mark on his forehead. (“All newborn soldiers of the Crucified bear on their brows the seal of Him who died,” *Lutheran Service Book* 837.) The military metaphor quickly breaks down, and the word “sacrament” can easily be misunderstood as something we do to become a Christian, rather than something God does to and for us. It would not be an understatement to suggest that the history of sacramental theology in the West has been a continual struggle to define *sacramentum* properly.

The word “mystery” (μυστήριον) originated in the ancient mystery cults of the seventh to fourth centuries BC. It means something that is secret or hidden. A μυστήριον is not so much a puzzle, like a “murder mystery,” as it is concealed knowledge that must be revealed. In the mystery cults, the “mysteries” were cultic rituals that portrayed or represented the actions of the gods on earth, and gave the participants a share in the gods’ life in heaven. The participant was initiated into these rituals, which were to be kept secret from the uninitiated.

In Christian usage, the idea of “mystery” lies very close to the Word Incarnate. Christ is the Mystery hidden from the ages and revealed to the world in His incarnation (Ephesians 1) and to us in the apostolic preaching of Christ. Not until the fourth century AD did the word “mystery” become a technical term for the rites of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper. For this reason, we should not read this later “sacramental” understanding of “mystery” back into the New Testament.

SCRIPTURAL USAGE AND UNDERSTANDING OF μυστήριον / SACRAMENTUM²

μυστήριον in the Septuagint (LXX)

The word only appears in the later books of the Hellenistic period, and may well reflect the influence of the mystery cults (Wisdom 6:22; 8:4). The ordinary sense of mystery as “secret” occurs in Tobit 12:7 (the secret plans of a king) or Sirach 22:22 (the secrets of a friend). In the book of Daniel, μυστήριον takes on a prophetic sense of the concealing of

future events to be disclosed and interpreted only by God or the prophets whom He inspires (Dan. 2:28–29; 4:9).

μυστήριον in the New Testament

μυστήριον occurs a total of 28 times in the New Testament. It is found only once in each of the synoptic gospels in the same parallel saying of Jesus (Matt. 13:11; Mark 4:11; Luke

¹ Theodore B. Foster, “Mysterium’ and ‘Sacramentum’ in the Vulgate and Old Latin Versions,” *The American Journal of Theology* 19: 3 (July 1915): 402–15.

² “μυστήριον” in Gerhard Kittel and Geoffrey W. Bromiley, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. 4 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1959), 802ff.

8:10). Jesus' parables reveal the "secrets" (μυστήρια) of the Kingdom to the disciples while concealing the same from the overhearing crowds. The parables themselves show the nature of "mystery" in the sense that they conceal and reveal at one and the same time. Their heavenly meaning is hidden to the unbeliever and the casual onlooker while it is revealed by the Lord to the faith of the disciple. "He who has ears, let him hear."

Christ as Mystery

In Paul's letters, the term "mystery" is connected to the preaching of Christ. Christ is the Mystery of God (Col. 2:2) and therefore the object of apostolic preaching (1 Cor. 2:6–16). This is a wisdom from God, decreed before the ages (1 Cor. 2:7) and hidden from the ages (Eph. 3:9), but revealed to the prophets and apostles, and preached by Paul in his apostolic ministry (Eph. 3:1–6).

The "mystery of God" is the history of the crucified, risen and exalted Lord Jesus Christ, which was prepared before the world was created (1 Cor. 2:7), concealed from the ages (1 Cor. 2:8, Eph. 3:9, Col. 1:26, Rom. 16:25) and hidden in God (Eph. 3:9). Its purpose is to unite all things in heaven and on earth together under one Head (ἀνακεφαλαιώω, literally "recapitulate") in the Christ. This is not simply an abstract piece of esoteric knowledge, but the actual breaking in of God into chronological history as the Lord of glory who dies and rises. The content of this "mystery" is "Christ among you" (Col. 1:27) and the ultimate unity of Jew and Gentile in the mystical body of Christ (Eph. 1:9–10).

The Mystery of Christ is revealed to the world in the apostolic proclamation of the Gospel (Eph. 3:9; 6:19; Col. 4:3) and is summarized in creedal form as the confession of Christ's incarnation, death, resurrection and ascension (1 Tim. 3:16). As proclaimers of the Gospel, the apostles are to be recognized both as servants of Christ and stewards of God's mysteries (1 Cor. 4:1).

Mystery as Hidden Knowledge

"Mystery" can also refer to hidden knowledge that could not be known apart from revelation. It is the gift of the prophet to penetrate the mysteries of God (1 Cor. 13:2), which are then also the prophetic content of speaking in tongues (1 Cor. 14:2). In Rom. 11:25, the eschatological of Israel in the hardening of a portion of Israel and in the inclusion of the Gentiles is a mystery to which Paul claims special insight. In 1 Corinthians, the instantaneous change that will take place in those who are yet alive at the coming of the Lord is also a "mystery" that has been revealed to the apostle (1 Cor. 15:51).

Of special importance is the "mystery" of Eph. 5:32. Here the "mystery" is the allegorical interpretation of Gen. 2:24 as a prophesy of Christ, who leaves Father and mother to be joined to His Bride, the Church, in His death. The Latin Vulgate translated 5:32 *Sacramentum hoc magnum est*, "this is a great sacrament," lending credence to the notion of marriage as a "sacrament." However, the referent is the Christological interpretation of Gen. 2:24, not the institution of marriage.

Mystery as Eschatological Reality

"Mystery" also is used in an apocalyptic sense to express the "now/not yet" tension of the eschaton. The "mystery of lawlessness" is already present and at work, though it has not yet been revealed (2 Thess. 2:7), just as the mystery of Babylon as the devil's base of operations in this world has not yet fully been revealed (Rev. 17:5, 7). The Mystery of God, who is Christ, is opposed in the last days by the "anti-mystery" of the anti-Christ, just as God's city (heavenly Jerusalem) is opposed by man's city (earthly Babylon). The Revelation prophetically reveals these heavenly, eschatological mysteries ahead of their manifestation in chronological history.

CONFESSIONAL USAGE AND UNDERSTANDING OF μυστήριον/ SACRAMENTUM

"Sacrament" in the Lutheran Confessions

Following the received Western dogmatic tradition, the Lutheran Confessions employ the term sacrament

(*sacramentum*) in place of mystery. The Apology defines "sacrament" as a "rite or sign which has the command of God and to which the promise of grace has been added"

(Ap. XIII.3).³ This definition comes directly from Melancthon's 1521 Loci. Under this definition, Baptism, the Lord's Supper and Absolution are numbered "sacraments" proper over the remaining four "sacraments" of the medieval church.

The Large Catechism, borrowing the language of Augustine, describes a "sacrament" as the Word added to an external element (*accedat verbum ad elementum et fit sacramentum*) (LC IV.18).⁴ Strictly speaking, the Catechism applies this Augustinian formula only to Baptism in order to underscore that Baptism is not simply water but water combined with the Word of God. This is not intended as a doctrinal definition of "sacrament," nor does it necessarily exclude Absolution from the Lutheran definition. Apology XIII makes that abundantly clear. The emphasis in the Catechism is the Word attached to the element, which brings the spiritual gifts of Christ to faith.

Apology XXIV, defending the right understanding and use of the Mass, argues against a "ritualistic magic" understanding of the operation of the Sacrament (*ex opera operato*) as well as a propitiatory understanding of its sacrificial character. The Apology distinguishes "sacrament" (*sacramentum*) from "sacrifice" (*sacrificium*). A sacrament is "a ceremony or act in which God offers us the content of the promise joined to the ceremony. ... By way of contrast, a sacrifice is a ceremony or act which we render to God to honor Him." (Ap. 24.17–18).⁵ The Apology further distinguishes propitiatory and eucharistic (i.e. thanksgiving) sacrifices. There is but one propitiatory sacrifice, namely, the death of Christ on the cross for the sin of the world. Any other sacrifice is an act of εὐχαριστία, thanksgiving for forgiveness and other blessings (Ap. 24.19).

The Lord's Supper is a sacrament, a sign of God's will toward us, and only secondarily a sacrifice of thanksgiving.

Promise and sign run together as one. "There are two parts to a sacrament, the sign and the Word. In the new Testament, the Word is the added promise of grace... Therefore the Word offers forgiveness of sins, while the ceremony is a sort of picture or "seal," as Paul calls it (Rom. 4:11), showing forth the promise" (Ap. 24.69–70).⁶ "The minister who consecrates shows forth the body and blood of the Lord to the people, just as a minister who preaches shows forth the gospel to the people, as Paul says (1 Cor. 4:1), "This is how one should regard us, as ministers of Christ and dispensers of the sacraments of God" (following the Vulgate) (Ap. 24.80).⁷

In summary, the Lutheran Confessions define "sacrament" as a sign of God's grace in Christ, an outward ceremony to which the promise of the Gospel has been added. The phrase "Word and Sacrament" on Lutheran lips can be rightly understood as "sacramental Word," the various material forms by which the Gospel of forgiveness comes to us, namely, the spoken Word, Baptism, the Sacrament of the Altar, the Keys (Absolution) and the conversation of Christians (SA 3.4.45).⁸

"Mystery" in the Lutheran Confessions

The Lutheran Confessions do not use the word "mystery" with reference to Baptism, Absolution, or the Lord's Supper, but they do use it to refer to the revelation of the Word. The "mysteries of faith" include Christ Himself (SD 9.96), the Incarnation and personal union of the two natures of Christ along with the communication of attributes (SD 8.22), the real presence of the Body and Blood of Christ in the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper (SD 7.101), Christ's descent to hell (SD 9.3) and the eternal election of the believer in Christ (SD 11.26, etc.).

TEACHING/PREACHING USAGE OF THE WORD

"Mystery" and "sacrament" are Gospel words. If the Gospel is hidden to unbelief, it is so that the faithful might walk by faith and not by sight. Faith comes from hearing not seeing. It requires no faith to see a pastor, water, bread and wine.

These are apparent to the senses. It requires faith to believe that "in, with, and under" these things, God reveals His undeserved kindness (grace) in Christ, and to receive the gifts of Christ that come with these gifts.

³ Theodore G. Tappert ed., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* 13th ed. (Philadelphia: Augsburg Fortress, 1959), 211.

⁴ Tappert, 438.

⁵ Tappert, 252.

⁶ Tappert, 262.

⁷ Tappert, 264.

⁸ Tappert, 310.

Why is it advantageous to faith to hide the spiritual reality of the sacraments? How does this understanding of mystery/sacrament affect our understanding of worship?

In the history of the Church, mystery and sacrament have suffered two basic misunderstandings. The first is the notion that these are rituals by which man is able to influence God or is able to tap into divine power. At the time of the Reformation, the Lord's Supper was said to be effective simply by its having been done (*ex opere operato*). Rightly understood, *ex opere operato* confessed the power of the Word of God alone in the Sacrament. Wrongly understood, however, it excluded faith as the means by which the blessings and benefits of the Sacrament were received, so that Masses could be said for those who were absent or even dead.

How do Lutherans unwittingly fall into an *ex opere operato* misunderstanding of the sacraments? What is the antidote to such a misunderstanding?

The second mistaken notion is that a sacrament or mystery falls under the control of man rather than God, with man running the sacramental verbs. In medieval Roman theology, this resulted in the Mass being regarded as a kind of atoning sacrifice for sin, a "re-presentation" of Christ's sacrifice on the cross to the Father by the hand of the priest. In contemporary Protestantism, the Lord's Supper is typically misunderstood as an act of Christian obedience to the ordinance of Christ as a type of "memorial meal" by which the Christian remembers what Christ has done.

How do Lutherans fall into the "work of man" misunderstanding of the sacraments? Which of the two do you think is the greater threat among us today?

Both views make the sacrament man's work rather than God's. This affects not only the understanding of Baptism, Absolution and the Lord's Supper, but the very nature of justification itself. Justification and salvation are seen as man's striving to ascend to God rather than God coming down to meet sinful man. It also feeds the false notion that the sacraments are something we can do in order to justify ourselves before God, a notion to which the old Adam clings tenaciously. The Lutheran Reformers rightly saw this as robbery of Christ's glory as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world by His sacrificial death. The very Gospel of Christ is at stake.

Rightly understood, mystery and sacrament point to Jesus Christ in His Incarnation. "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14). Just as our Lord's divinity was hidden under His humanity, so His sacrificial Body and Blood, given for the life of the world, are hidden under bread and wine. So also, our rebirth and renewal in the Spirit are hidden under baptismal water, the forgiveness of our sins is hidden under the humility of human words emanating from the mouth of a fellow sinner. Yet the Mystery proclaimed is the Mystery actually present among us (Col. 1:27), even where as few as two or three are gathered (Matt. 18:20).

Discuss how you incorporate the sacraments in your preaching and teaching.

DISCUSSION

1. Lutherans often refer to the sacraments as "means of grace," though this phrase is never explicitly used in the Confessions. How might this way of describing the sacraments be mistakenly understood? How is it rightly understood? Why might "signs of grace" (Ap. 24) be preferred? Which is closer to the sense of "mystery"?

The notion of "means of grace" can be misconstrued as "conduits or instruments" by which God gives us "grace" (as sanctifying power). Practically, this often comes out in the form of the church as a "filling station" where one fills up on "grace" (or forgiveness) as a commodity that has been depleted. This runs contrary to the Lutheran understanding of grace as God's undeserved kindness for the sake of Christ. The sacraments

reveal this kindness of God to sinners in Christ by revealing and applying the promise of salvation in Christ to the individual.

2. In 1 Cor. 4:1, the apostle Paul states that people should regard apostolic ministers as "servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God." In what sense does this correspond to our Lutheran understanding of "Word and Sacrament ministry"? How is it not quite the same? What are some of the "occupational hazards" of handling the holy things of God as stewards of God's mysteries?

The apostles, and their successors in apostolic office, are servants of Christ as they act "in His stead and by His command" with His authority. In proclaiming the

Gospel of Christ in all its sacramental forms, pastors are stewards and administrators of the God's mysteries revealed in Christ. However, we need to be cautious of equating the later development and institutionalization of the pastoral office with this early usage from Paul, nor may we suggest from this passage that the sacraments lose their efficacy or validity if they are administered by someone not in the pastoral office.

The vocational danger with being a steward of the mysteries of God is that the steward begins to take lightly that of which he is given stewardship. Luther once remarked that the theologians treat the Word of God the way a shoemaker treats a piece of leather, that is, as something that can be manipulated to suit one's ends and purposes. A fruitful discussion might be had over how pastors can be a bit like cooks who work behind the scenes in a restaurant and become cavalier over the menu. Pastors as presiders in worship are vulnerable to boredom through repetition and familiarity.

3. We live in a skeptical age in which people demand scientific evidence for any truth claim. How do we teach the concept "mystery" as something hidden from sight and revealed by the Word to people who are accustomed to measurable scientific data? What are some of the challenges to preaching and teaching the "mysteries of the faith" in our age?

A "mystery" goes beyond our senses and observation. It demands that we walk by faith and not by sight. We have some analogies from the world of science that might be helpful. We can't "see" dark matter, black holes, quarks, or bosons, but we can infer their existence from mathematics. In the sacraments, God's Word reveals the "something more" that goes beyond what we can see or experience. The eye sees bread and wine, as the tongue tastes the same. Scientific analysis would reveal nothing more. But the Word of Christ reveals that the bread and wine of the Sacrament are also Christ's very Body and Blood.

This is but one example of the several challenges to preaching and teaching in our modern, scientific age. People seek "proof" and "hard data." Yet the mysteries of the faith are spoken to the ear not the eye. "Faith comes from hearing" (Rom. 10:17).

4. Jesus Christ is the Mystery/Sacrament *par excellence*. How does this impact our preaching, teaching and practice?

In preaching the "mystery of the faith," we are preaching Jesus Christ and Him crucified for the justification of the sinner. Like everything else in the Lutheran approach to theology, everything is centered on the incarnation, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus, including the doctrines of Baptism, Absolution, the Lord's Supper and the Office of the Holy Ministry. To preach the sacraments as a Lutheran is to preach Jesus Christ, and to preach Jesus Christ is to preach the sacraments.

5. How would you teach the terms "mystery" and "sacrament" to a Bible class or a catechism class? What examples from ordinary life might serve as suitable analogies?

This is an opportunity to discuss how these biblical and theological concepts can be put into plain language. In the Large Catechism on the Third Article of the Creed, Luther sees the sacramental Word as the means by which the gifts of Jesus' death on the cross come to us in our time and place. What was won at Calvary is delivered, offered and applied in the sacraments (LC 3.38ff). A useful "Gospel delivery" analogy might be the UPS truck that delivers the item manufactured elsewhere to our front door. The sacraments are also "signs of God's grace in Christ" (Ap. 13), revealing what we could not know by our reason or strength, namely, our justification in Christ. The sacraments might be viewed as "buried treasure" to which the Word directs us. Just as the shepherds of Bethlehem were led by the preaching of the angel to Bethlehem's manger and the swaddled newborn, so the Word directs us to the water, words, bread and wine of the sacraments where Christ is revealed to us.

SUMMARY

The words "mystery" and "sacrament" point to the Word Incarnate, our Lord Jesus Christ. Just as Christ is true God hidden under true man, yet fully God and man, so the sacramental Word comes to us as the Mystery proclaimed

and revealed in human words, water, bread and wine. "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed" (John 20:29).



February 2017

Reconciliation

Still More Words of Life for the Church and for the World
2016–17 LCMS Circuit Bible Studies

LEADER'S GUIDE

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“We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God” (2 Cor. 5:20). From the time of Adam and Eve’s first sin up to the present day, human beings long to be put back in a right relationship with their Creator. Only Jesus Christ is able to bring about reconciliation between God and man. His innocent shedding of blood and glorious resurrection from the dead makes peace between our heavenly Father and His dear children. The Divine Service of Word and Sacrament delivers God’s reconciliation to us in His gifts of preaching, Baptism, Absolution, and the Lord’s Supper. God is at work among His faithful, gifting them with the joy of being put right with Him because of Jesus.

As Jesus has put us right with our Father in heaven, so we too daily strive to be in a right relationship with our neighbor. When we disagree, we drop everything, as it

were, and seek reconciliation with our neighbor, as Jesus bids us do in Matt. 5:21–26. The reconciliation of Jacob and Esau in Genesis 32–33 shows that as Christ has put away our sin in His work of reconciliation on our behalf, we too put away the sin of our neighbor, even our family member, and strive to be reconciled with those with whom we have a disagreement.

Reconciliation is a vital part of pastoral care to the afflicted conscience. The pastor utilizes Scripture to show the troubled soul how Christ’s blood has brought them into our Father’s good graces. No longer do they have to wonder if they qualify to be a child of God. God has qualified them in Jesus Christ. His blood and righteousness salves the conscience and delivers the certain hope of eternal life.

SCRIPTURAL USAGE AND UNDERSTANDING OF THE WORD

Old Testament

The closest Hebrew vocable for “reconciliation” is the noun רצוה. Used 55 times in the Old Testament, רצוה means “to be pleased with, be favorable to, accept favorably.” The word appears most in the Psalms, where it is translated as “pleased” (Ps. 40:13), “delighted” (Ps. 44:3), and “favorable” (Ps. 77:7). רצוה appears in Is. 40:2, where it is translated as “pardoned” and in Is. 42:1 as “delights.” The word is often translated as “accepted” in the book of Leviticus (1:4; 7:18; 19:7; 22:23, 25, 27, “make amends” in 26:41, 43).

The noun is often understood in a passive way, as in God being pleased or delighted with someone or something. Man cannot please God on his own. God is pleased, delighted or favorably inclined toward man because of something on the part of God. Read 1 Chron. 28:4 to see how King David does not find God’s pleasure, in choosing him as king, in something he did, but in the fact that God was pleased (רצוה) with him.

New Testament

“Reconciliation” is easier to find in New Testament Greek. The vocable is the verb καταλλάσσω, “to reconcile” and the noun καταλλαγή, “reconciliation, atonement, reconciling.” While not using the actual vocable itself, our Lord Jesus Christ has reconciliation in mind when He uses the verb

διαλλάσσομαι, “reconciled to someone” in Matt. 5:24. Here our Lord says, “be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.” Here we see again the passive voice; one cannot reconcile with another by doing something in himself. There is an agent acting outside of man that causes reconciliation. We see what that agent outside of man is in verse 23: “So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you.” One “comes to remember” (μνησθῆς); a passive, subjunctive remembrance. Read Matt. 18:15–20 to see how reconciliation happens in the church among people who disagree with one another. Though the word “reconciliation” is not directly used in Matthew 18, the sentiment of reconciliation is there.

Saint Paul often uses “reconciliation” to proclaim how we are saved by Christ’s propitiatory sacrifice for our sins. Read Rom. 5:1–11. Paul uses passive voice in verse 10 when he writes, “For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of His Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by His life.” The death of Jesus Christ brings reconciliation between God and man. Verse 11 shows that since we are not active in this dispensation from God, we are said to “have now received reconciliation.” The blood of man changes nothing in man’s relationship with God. Only the blood of Jesus Christ, the mediator of a new covenant, whose sprinkled blood speaks

a better word than the blood of Abel (Heb. 12:24), is able to bring about reconciliation.

The source of reconciliation between God and man is God's love. "It is important to note that Paul traces the entire matter of justification, peace, etc., to God's love as its source. God's love is present and productive at the very beginning. It is the motivating cause of our καταλλαγή. There are some who assume that καταλλάσσειν points to a change in God, that during the process He changed from an irate into a placated God, that some sort of appeasement took place. But no, not the least change took place in the heart of God. It was His love that was active during the entire process of καταλλάσσειν. The change was effected in our status before our Judge."¹

Perhaps Paul's masterwork concerning reconciliation is in 2 Cor. 5:11–21. Paul uses a form of the word "reconciliation" at least six times in verses 18–21. The word is used in active voice in verses 18–19. Note, though, who is doing the reconciling. In what spirit will those whom He appoints to administer the καταλλαγή perform their work? "Ὑπὲρ Χριστοῦ," Paul says emphatically. They will consider it throughout as Christ's work, being careful neither to add, nor to omit, nor to alter one iota. ... The ambassador realizes that it is God Himself who is channeling His appeal through us. He will remember that God stretches out His hand, beckoning the people to come. ... This God is proclaiming his καταλλαγή through us. Can we do other than what Paul now states [in verse 20]: δεόμεθα ὑπὲρ Χριστοῦ, καταλλάγητε τῷ θεῷ, we implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God?"²

How is the message of reconciliation delivered? "The administration of the καταλλαγή is carried out by means of the Word. The Word is made the vehicle for conveying and applying the καταλλαγή to the world. There is no other way of administering it. This Word is a very definite thing. God has placed it firmly. He has established it. It is not something that we should develop, find by observation or self-inspection, and clarify by study and speculation. No, God established it, and thus it stands for us to proclaim without addition or subtraction or alteration. It is the Word which God established through which the καταλλαγή is brought to us and through which we bring it to the world."³ The Word does it all. The Word applied in preaching the Gospel brings the Good News of reconciliation into the ears of the hearers. The Word applied in Baptism splashes Christ's blood-bought reconciliation over the sinner. The Word applied under bread and wine in the Lord's Supper feeds reconciliation in an up-close and personal way. Reconciliation is put in and on the sinner in a *purely passive way*, even when the verb is used in active voice. God is the actor, the sinner is the receiver of the action.

Paul uses a form of καταλλαγή in Col. 1:20. The verb here is ἀποκαταλλάσσω, to reconcile completely or to bring back again. "[The Colossians] were ἀπηλλοτριωμένοι (a perfect participle, denoting a state of alienation) and ἐχθροί (Col. 1:21). This state was brought about by their minds in their wicked works. ... But now Christ ἀποκατήλλαξεν them by giving His very flesh into death, to present them as holy and blameless and unrebukable in His judgment by the sacrifice of Himself (Col.1:22)."⁴

CONFSSIONAL USAGE AND UNDERSTANDING

Lutheran Confessions

Reconciliation and justification are closely tied together in the Confessions. Both are the heart of the Gospel message of Jesus Christ. "[T]he Gospel is properly the kind of teaching that shows what a person who has not kept the Law (and therefore is condemned by it) is to believe. It teaches that Christ has paid for and made satisfaction for all sins

[Rom. 5:9]. Christ has gained and acquired for an individual — without any of His own merit — forgiveness of sins, righteousness that avails before God, and eternal life [Rom. 5:10]" (FC Ep.V:5). The *pure passive* of reconciliation also proclaims the bound will of man in spiritual matters. "When God's Word is preached, a person does not and cannot understand God's Word, but regards it as foolishness

1 Meyer, John P., *Ministers of Christ* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1963, 2011), 104.

2 *op.cit.*, 109–10.

3 *op.cit.*, 102–3.

4 *op.cit.*, 108.

[1 Cor. 2:14]. Also, he does not draw near to God on his own. He is, and remains, God's enemy until he is converted, becomes a believer, is endowed with faith, and is regenerated and renewed [Rom. 5:10]. This happens by the Holy Spirit's power through the Word when it is preached and heard, out of pure grace, without any cooperation of his own [Titus 3:4–7]" (FC SD II:5).

The Formula of Concord also connects reconciliation to retaining imputed righteousness and to *sola fide*. "[T]he promise, not only of receiving, but also of retaining righteousness and salvation, is firm and sure to us. St. Paul ascribes to faith not only the entrance of grace, but says that we stand in grace and boast of the future glory. In other words, he credits the beginning, middle, and end to *faith alone*. ... '[He will] present you holy and blameless and above reproach before Him, if indeed you continue in the faith' (Col. 1:22–23)" (FC SD IV:34).

Reconciliation is found when a person lives their vocation instead of joining a monastery in order to make vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. "True Christian perfection is to fear God from the heart, to have great faith, and to trust that for Christ's sake we have a God who has been reconciled [2 Cor. 5:18–19]. It means to ask for and expect from God His help in all things with confident assurance that we are to live according to our calling in life, being diligent in outward good works, serving in our calling. This is where true perfection and true service of God is to be found" (AC XXVII:49–50).

The Divine Service delivers the reconciliation Jesus wins for us in His salvific death and triumphant resurrection. "[T]he [Roman Catholic] Mass is and can be nothing more than a human work (as Church law and all the books declare, even when it is performed by wicked scoundrels). The

attempt is to reconcile oneself and others to God [see 2 Cor. 5:18–20], and to merit and deserve the forgiveness of sins and grace by the Mass. ... This is why it must and should be condemned and rejected. For the Mass directly conflicts with the chief article, which says that it is not someone paid to perform the Mass (whether wicked or godly) who takes away our sins with his work, but the Lamb of God, the Son of God" (SA II:II:7). The word "liturgy" well describes the delivery of God's reconciliation through Jesus Christ. "[Liturgy] does not properly mean a sacrifice, but rather the public ministry [*publicum ministerium*]. Liturgy agrees well with our belief that one minister who consecrates gives the Lord's body and blood to the rest of the people, just as one minister who preaches offers the Gospel to the people. As Paul says ... 'We are ambassadors for Christ, God making His appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God'" (Ap. XXIV:80).

The Large Catechism confesses reconciliation as a part of the Eighth Commandment. "In Matthew 18:15, Christ says, 'If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone.' Here you have a precious and excellent teaching for governing well the tongue, which is to be carefully kept against this detestable misuse. Let this, then, be your rule, that you do not too quickly spread evil about your neighbor and slander him to others. Instead, admonish him privately that he may amend his life. Likewise, if someone reports to you what this or that person has done, teach him, too, to go and admonish that person personally, if he has seen the deed himself. But if he has not seen it, then let him hold his tongue" (LC I:276). A brother is won back not by slander, but by reconciliation; a reconciliation that happens between two individuals mutually confessing their sin and absolving one another as ambassadors of righteousness.

TEACHING/PREACHING USAGE OF "RECONCILIATION"

Consider these words from "A Meditation on Christ's Passion" by Martin Luther:

You cast your sins from yourself and onto Christ when you firmly believe that his wounds and sufferings are your sins, to be borne and paid for by him, as we read in Isaiah 53:6, "The Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all." St. Peter says, "in his body has he borne our sins on the wood of the cross" (1 Pet. 2:24). St. Paul says, "God has made him a sinner for us, so that through him

we would be made just" (2 Cor. 5:21). You must stake everything on these and similar verses. The more your conscience torments you, the more tenaciously must you cling to them. If you do not do that, but presume to still your conscience with your contrition and penance, you will never obtain peace of mind, but will have to despair in the end. If we allow sin to remain in our conscience and try to deal with it there, or if we look at sin in our heart, it will be much too strong for us and will live on

forever. But if we behold it resting on Christ and [see it] overcome by his resurrection, and then boldly believe this, even it is dead and nullified. Sin cannot remain on Christ, since it is swallowed up by his resurrection. Now you see no wounds, no pain in him, and no sign of sin. Thus St. Paul declares that “Christ died for our sin and rose for our justification” (Rom. 4:25). That is to say, in his suffering Christ makes our sin known and thus destroys it, but through his resurrection he justifies us and delivers us from all sin, if we believe this.⁵

1. If being reconciled to God depended upon our perfect keeping of the Law, how would this affect the proper distinction of Law and Gospel in our preaching and teaching?

Reconciliation is rooted in the all-sufficient shedding of Christ's blood for our sake. Anything that points the soul away from Christ as Reconciler and to the soul's attempts to make oneself just before God denies the Chief Article of the Christian faith. Christ's perfect obedience, salvific death and glorious resurrection from the dead become an example for the Christian and not the source of our righteousness and holiness before God.

2. How do we apply 2 Cor. 5:18–21 to a disturbed conscience in individual soul care, especially in caring for the soul who is suffering due to a disagreement with spouse or neighbor?

Luther's words are clear: “You must stake everything on these and similar verses. The more your conscience torments you, the more tenaciously must you cling to them.” The source of reconciliation between one's spouse and one's neighbor is clinging to Scripture's clear proclamation of Christ's reconciliation for all.

As Christ has put away your sin, so the soul also puts away the sin against his neighbor, as well as the neighbor's sin toward you.

Note to the leader: If you have a copy of *Luther: Letters of Spiritual Counsel*, it would be worthwhile to consider a discussion of Table Talk 865 on pages 123–24. Here Luther deals with comforting the soul afflicted with whether or not they are one of the elect, especially if the soul is concerned with the lack of peace in their soul being evidence of not being one of the elect.

3. Second Corinthians 5:14–21, one of the primary Scripture texts that proclaim reconciliation between God and man through Jesus Christ, is the Epistle for Good Friday in the One Year Lectionary. How would you preach this text in the context of the day when our Savior said, “It is finished” from the cross, especially considering reconciliation with one's neighbor?

Good Friday and 2 Cor. 5:14–21 walk hand-in-hand to proclaim “[Jesus Christ] died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for Him who for their sake died and was raised” (2 Cor. 5:15). Living in Christ, for Christ, means that as Christ's death accomplishes the necessary reconciliation for sin, so we too, as a New Creation by virtue of our baptism into the death and resurrection of Christ, also consider our neighbor as a reconciled child of God with whom we are to live in peace. We may not consider our neighbor a friend, but our neighbor is one for whom Christ died. If we live in disagreement with our neighbor, we are reminded that we are sent as an ambassador of Christ to be reconciled with our neighbor. Ultimately it is Christ Who accomplishes all reconciliation between both God and our neighbor.

DISCUSSION

1. How does the reconciliation of Jacob and Esau in Genesis 33 serve as a pattern of reconciliation between two people?

Luther's Genesis lectures stress the power of prayer in reconciliation. “The wealth and material blessings which [Esau] had could not have healed an embittered heart, although at times they do soothe grievances.

But the might and efficacy of prayer was greater. If we pray seriously and perseveringly, the only result can be that a friend is made out of an enemy. But let us only cry out and place our hope not on our worthiness but like a smoking flax (cf. Is. 42:3) on the goodness and mercy of God. Then God most certainly hears us. This is a true reconciliation of brothers and not a

⁵ *Luther's Works (LW)*, American Edition 56 vols, (St. Louis: Concordia and Philadelphia: Fortress, 1955–1986) 42:12–13.

pretended one, just as Moses enumerates the surest signs of brotherly goodwill and love in both of them.”⁶ The proverb “Time heals all wounds” often proves true, but there are instances where disagreeing people never forget what drove them apart and hold their grievance over the other person. Here again we recall Luther’s words quoted earlier: “As Christ has put away your sin, so the soul also puts away the sin against his neighbor, as well as the neighbor’s sin toward you.” Jesus does not hold your sin over you. Neither should you hold a sin over your neighbor. God’s love for both Esau and Jacob won the day as both men buried their disagreements and were reconciled.

2. What is the connection between reconciliation and a good conscience? Consider your answer in light of Gal. 2:17–20.

Luther has the answer in his Lectures on Galatians: “Through the Law, therefore, we are condemned and killed; but through Christ we are justified and made alive. The Law terrifies us and drives us away from God. But Christ reconciles us to God and makes it possible for us to have access to Him. For Christ is the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29). Thus the believer in Christ has the One who took away the sins of the world. If the sin of the world is taken away, then it is taken away also from me, as one who believes in Him. And if sin is taken away, then wrath is taken away; and if wrath is taken away, so are death and damnation. Righteousness replaces sin; reconciliation and grace replace wrath; life replaces death; and eternal salvation replaces damnation. Let us learn to practice this distinction, not only in words but in its application to our life and in our feelings. For where Christ is, there must be a good conscience and joy; Christ Himself is our Reconciliation, Righteousness, Peace, Life, and Salvation. Whatever the miserable and afflicted conscience seeks, that it finds in Christ.”⁷

3. Reflect on this quote from C.F.W. Walther’s 14th Evening Lecture on “The Proper Distinction between Law and Gospel” on how difficult it is not to slip into placing reconciliation solely in the hands of sinful people.

However, these sects [e.g. Methodists] imagine that, now that Christ has done His share, man must still do *his* — and man is not reconciled to God until both efforts meet. These sects picture reconciliation to mean that the Savior made God *willing* to save people — provided they, on their part, are *willing* to be reconciled. But that is the complete reverse of the Gospel. *God* is reconciled — not man. ... Therefore, nothing at all is required on the part of mankind to reconcile God. He *already* is reconciled. Righteousness is ready and waiting. Humans must not first achieve it. If we were to attempt to do so, that would be an awful crime, a battle against grace and against the reconciliation and perfect redemption accomplished by the Son of God.⁸

⁶ LW 6:166.

⁷ LW 26:151.

⁸ Walther, C.F.W., *Law and Gospel: How to Read and Apply the Bible*. (Saint Louis: Concordia, 2010), 152–53.



March 2017

Priesthood

Still More Words of Life for the Church and for the World
2016–17 LCMS Circuit Bible Studies

LEADER'S GUIDE

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FOCUS OF THIS STUDY

In Holy Baptism God consecrated all Christians to be His royal priesthood. In Holy Baptism God made us holy through the forgiveness of sins. He set us apart from the rest of the human race to serve Him as His royal priests. Priests are holy persons who perform holy services to the glory of God and for the life of the world.

God does not want us to invent our own way of serving Him as His royal priesthood. Our High Priest gathers His royal priesthood together each week in the Divine Service to give us His holy gifts. The gifts given in the Divine Service enliven, energize and shape the lives of the royal priesthood so that the royal priesthood might offer up to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving and praise in serving Him and our neighbor in need.

SCRIPTURAL USAGE AND UNDERSTANDING

The term “royal priesthood” or “priesthood of all believers” is often confused or misunderstood in the church today. Please read the following verses of Scripture, which teach the “priesthood of all believers.”

Read Exodus 19:5–6.

Both textually and historically, Ex. 19:5–6 is the foundational text about the kingdom of priests or the priesthood of all believers. The Lord chose Israel out of all the nations of the earth to be for Him a kingdom of priests. Priests are mediators. Israel was to be a witness for the Lord to the nations of the world. They were to protect and preserve the gifts of the Lord’s grace and mercy. They were to confess before the whole world that their God was the only true God, who in mercy had planned a way to deliver His people from sin and death. In Exodus 19, Moses does what the Lord does; he sanctifies the people (19:10, 14). The people are a holy people, and a kingdom of priests.

They are consecrated according to the Lord’s mandate and institution and they are set apart by Him to be a priestly kingdom.

1. How was Israel set apart from all the other nations of the world?
2. What was the covenant that the children of Israel were to keep with God?

Discussion questions:

1. How do your parishioners understand the royal priesthood?
2. Why is the term “priesthood of all believers” often confused or misunderstood in the church today?
3. What are some of the priestly duties that a Christian is consecrated to perform?
4. Is there a difference between the royal priesthood and the Office of the Holy Ministry?

3. How does Moses consecrate the people in priestly service?
4. How do pastors consecrate their parishioners in their priestly service?

Read 1 Peter 2:1–8.

This classic text on the royal priesthood is set in the context of what might be called an “exorcism.” “So put away all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander” (1 Peter 2:1). The newly baptized Christians are to cast off and wash away these sins. And, “Like newborn infants, long for pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation — if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good” (1 Peter 2:2–3).

5. What kind of spiritual warfare does the royal priesthood face each day?
6. According to Peter how might our preaching incite people to long for the Word of God, Holy Absolution and Christ’s body and blood in the Sacrament of the Altar? How might we encourage each other to become better preachers?

The Apostle Peter compels the hearer to “Come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, you yourselves like living stones are being

built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For as it stands in Scripture: ‘Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious, and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.’ So the honor is for you who believe, but for those who do not believe, ‘The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone,’ and ‘a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense.’ They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do” (1 Peter 2:4–8).

7. What are the connections that Peter makes with the “living stones,” and Christ the “Living Stone”?
8. Why do people stumble over Christ the “Living Stone”?
9. How do people stumble over the Word of God that is preached from your pulpits?
10. How do we encourage each as brothers in the Office of the Holy Ministry to preach and teach even when people have “itching” ears?

There can be no schism, no division, between the Living Stone and the living stones being built into a spiritual house, into a royal priesthood for offering spiritual sacrifices. Neither can the “stone of stumbling and rock of offense” be separated from the Word about Him. People stumble because they pay no attention (*hypokee*) to it nor hold to it.

St. Peter paints a beautiful picture in this text of how the Church, His kingdom of priests, is built together. The church is not a pile of rocks that we can do with as we please. We are not charged to build the church or change it to our own specifications. Instead, the master builder cuts a stone, chisels it, pounds and polishes it and puts it where He wants with the other stones. The point is that we are a priesthood! We are not a pile of rolling stones to do with as we please. Christ builds His Church, the royal priesthood, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against her.

11. How might this text reflect on how we as pastors treat the holy things of God? Examples: the Divine Service, hymnody, architecture, postures etc.
12. How do we teach our people to treat the holy things of God?

Read 1 Peter 2:9–10.

Notice the emphasis on community versus individuality in these verses. The work of the royal priesthood is never done in isolation. God says, “You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation.” It is if God were saying to us, “I

vote for you!” “I have put my own signature on you with my own blood.” “You are a precious jewel in the crown of the King of Kings.” With apostolic boldness, St. Peter says about the Church what is said of Christ. The heavenly Father said this of Jesus at His Baptism, “‘This is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased’” (Matt. 3:17).

When God looks upon His royal priesthood He says, “This is my beloved, my church, my royalty, my chosen race, my own possession.” There is none other like her on earth.

13. How does the Apostle Peter’s view of community differ from the way that many of our parishioners have been taught?
14. How does God view His church and how might we best teach this to our parishioners?

Debates regarding “church and ministry” have perhaps clouded the fact that the primary distinction in 1 Peter 2:1–10 is not an anticlerical distinction between those who are called and ordained into the Office of the Holy Ministry and the rest of the baptized, but between faith and unbelief. The Church is a priesthood, and within that priesthood there is an Office of the Public Ministry established by God Himself to provide stewardship over for the spiritual house that God has built. All believers are priests, but not all priests hold the Office of the Public Ministry. First Peter 2:1–10 describes the identity and activity of the royal priesthood.

In this spiritual house, Christ established the Office of the Public Ministry to provide for the ongoing public administration of God’s grace through the full proclamation of His Word and faithful administration of the Sacraments. Those men Christ calls into this office administer these gifts on behalf of all. Pastors are not lords but called to be servants of the Word for the sake of both the royal priesthood and those outside the priesthood that they might be brought to repentance and faith, as well as built up in this faith. Individual Christians serve God in their vocations because they are baptized into the royal priesthood. The pastor is a royal priest by virtue of his Baptism, to be sure, but by virtue of the Divine Call he has received from God through the Church he specifically acts to preach and teach the Word of God and administer the Sacraments on behalf of all. An individual royal priest must not take to himself what belongs to all. Instead, the whole body, the whole royal priesthood, acts together through the pastor called by God through the Church to do what belongs to all, i.e., public preaching of the Word, administration of the Sacraments, church discipline, and the like. Christ has chosen to do these things in the Church through the Office of the Public Ministry on behalf

of the whole Church and for the sake of each member of the whole Body of Christ. In other words, Christ gives the keys of the kingdom to the Church so that the whole Church possesses them and every member of the royal priesthood uses them within his or her vocation. But when the keys are exercised publicly on behalf of all, Christ does this through the Office of the Public Ministry, which stands within, not apart from, the Church or the royal priesthood. Through this ministry, Christ prepares His royal priests for their duties.

The 1 Peter text has often been used as a polemic against the Roman Catholic conception of the priesthood — that is, since Jesus Christ is our High Priest we do not need a human priest as a mediator between God and the Christian. As each believer is a priest, he or she may go directly to God. Such a use of the text misses the apostle's point. The Church is not a collection of isolated priests, each doing our own thing before God. Rather Peter says that we are built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood.

15. What are the duties of the royal priesthood?

The royal priesthood offers sacrifices. The royal priesthood speaks to other people on behalf of God and priests speak to God on behalf of other people. These sacrifices are to be offered daily. Martin Luther describes this daily sacrifice in his Small Catechism. “What does such baptizing with water indicate? It indicates that the Old Adam in us should by daily contrition and repentance be drowned and die with all sins and evil desires, so the new man might daily arise and live before God and righteousness and purity forever.”

[Read Psalm 51:17, Romans 12:1–2, Psalm 141:2.](#)

16. What are the sacrifices that are acceptable and pleasing to God?

17. How do the Ten Commandments, Apostle's Creed and Lord's Prayer shape the life of the royal priesthood?

Pastors are called to oversee and teach the royal priesthood in their priestly work. The main tool for teaching is the Small Catechism. The Small Catechism is the royal priesthood's handbook and prayer book.

The faithful pastor will see to it that the Small Catechism is in the hands and ears of the royal priesthood.

Luther admonishes pastors of this great task in the Preface to the Large Catechism:

“For sadly we see that many pastors and preachers are very negligent in this matter and slight both their office and this teaching. Some neglect the catechism. ... But for myself I say this: I too, am also a doctor and preacher; yes, as learned and experienced as all the people who have such assumptions and contentment. Yet I act like a child who is being taught the catechism. Every morning — and whenever I have time — I read and say, word for word, the Ten Commandments, the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, the Psalms, and such. I must still read and study them daily. Yet I cannot master the catechism as I wish. But I must remain a child and pupil of the catechism, and am glad to remain so. Yet these delicate, refined fellows would in one reading promptly become doctors above all doctors, know everything and need nothing. Well, in this, too, is a sure sign that they despise both their office and the souls of the people. Indeed, they even despise God and His Word. They do not have to fall. They have already fallen all too horribly. They need to become children and begin to learn their alphabet, which they imagine they have long outgrown (Mark 10:15)” (LC, Martin Luther's Preface, 1, 7–8).¹

CONFESSIONAL USAGE AND UNDERSTANDING

In the Treatise on the Power and the Primacy of the Pope, Melancthon argued that the Pope might not locate the making of pastors and bishops solely in himself. Melancthon writes, “So wherever there is a True Church, the right to elect and ordain ministers necessarily exists. In the same way, in a case of necessity even a layman absolves and becomes the minister and pastor of another. Augustine

tells the story of two Christians in a ship, one of whom baptized the catechumen, who after Baptism then absolved the baptizer. Here belong the statements of Christ that testify that the Keys have been given to the Church, and not merely to certain persons, ‘Where two or three are gathered in My name ...’ (Matt. 18:20).

¹ All quotations from the *Book of Concord* from Paul McCain et al, eds., *Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2005).

Finally, Peter's statement also confirms this, 'You are ... a royal priesthood' (1 Peter 2:9). These words apply to the True Church, which certainly has the right to elect and ordain ministers, since it alone has the priesthood. A most common custom of the Church also testifies to this. Formerly, the people elected pastors and bishops" (Tr 67–70).

It is interesting to note that the Small Catechism's Table of Duties does not once mention the term royal priesthood or kingdom of priests. Yet they are priestly duties because of the sacrifice of their lives both to the Lord and as they serve their neighbor in need.

TEACHING/PREACHING USAGE OF THE WORD

Luther wrote, "A priest, particularly in the New Testament, must be born, not made. He is not ordained; he is created. However, he is not born of flesh but of the Spirit, that is, of the water, and the Spirit in the washing of regeneration. Therefore all Christians are priests, and all priests are Christians."²

This connection of the royal priesthood is of utmost importance. In Baptism we are saved from original sin into the Kingdom of God. Our baptism is the basis for our priesthood, not some quality in ourselves. In the Kingdom of God we no longer live for ourselves. A number of things come to mind in connection with every Christian being a royal priest.

1. The priesthood involves relationship and community.
2. There are no private priests. The royal priesthood is not an individual thing.
3. The royal priesthood contradicts selfishness.

4. The royal priesthood will suffer for the sake of others.
5. The royal priesthood is strengthened and held together in the Divine Service by the Holy Word and in Holy Communion.

The Post Communion Collect describes our life together in the royal priesthood in a profound manner. "We give thanks to you, almighty God, that you have refreshed us through this salutary gift, and we implore you that of your mercy you would strengthen us through the same in faith toward you and in fervent love toward one another; through Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen" (*LSB*, p. 201).

Notice what the communed are praying for: faith toward God and love toward their neighbor. The royal priesthood is intimately connected to the Sacrament of the Altar.

DISCUSSION

1. How do the Scriptures teaching of the royal priesthood differ from how the world looks at human beings?
2. Does this study change how you look at the Church? At your parishioners? At the world?
3. How might the proper understanding of the royal priesthood help in our discussion as The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod in terms of church and ministry?
4. Why are the Sacraments so important to the royal priesthood?

² Ewald Plass, ed., *What Luther Says* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 1139.

SUMMARY

God has consecrated us as priests in Holy Baptism. The royal priesthood is a wonderful gift of God. Our Lord assigns to us our sacrificial priestly duties daily in service to God and our neighbor. We may not choose how we are going to function as His royal priesthood. The royal priestly duties are done daily in the home, at work and at church. The royal priesthood is never off duty. In order to fulfill the holy orders, the royal priesthood must be trained and taught by the pastors with the Holy Scriptures, the Lutheran Confessions and the Liturgy and Hymnody of the Church.



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Authority

Still More Words of Life for the Church and for the World
2016–17 LCMS Circuit Bible Studies

LEADER'S GUIDE

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FOCUS OF THIS STUDY

It's likely that, at some point in your ministry, a parishioner will call your authority into question. "Who are you to say?" Equally likely is that you may fall into the temptation to appeal to your authority and exert your will upon a situation, "Because I'm the Pastor!" For both, there needs to be repentance and forgiveness. By returning to a godly understanding of the source and use of authority in both the Church and the Office of the Ministry, our people can believe that what we preach and declare is just as valid and certain, even in heaven, as if Christ our dear Lord deals with us Himself. Godly authority is also a great comfort to pastors so that we can boldly proclaim God's Word — Law and Gospel — knowing that it is not our Word or forgiveness, but God's.

SCRIPTURAL USAGE AND UNDERSTANDING

Jesus was often challenged to demonstrate by what authority He was preaching, teaching and acting. Because He challenged the established authority of the Jewish religious leaders; He had to substantiate that His authority superseded their own. Read the following passages about authority to see how we should understand the authority given to pastors to serve.

Jesus' authority questioned

› Read Mark 2:1–12

Jesus demonstrates His authority over sin by performing a miracle over the effects of sin. The scribes took offence when Jesus proclaimed forgiveness, because only God has authority to forgive sins. They also understood that God's authority to demonstrate forgiveness has been mediated to the priests and the sacrificial system of the temple. Jesus' ability to declare forgiveness apart from sacrifice or the religious establishment threatened their own authority over the people. God wasn't acting in accordance with what they had built their own authority on.

› Read Mark 11:27–33

The Chief Priests, Scribes and Elders were trying to validate Jesus' authority behind His words and actions. They sought to discredit Him and hold on to their corrupt authority over the people, which was founded on a righteousness of the Law, not on the promises of God. They were reluctant

Questions:

1. What authority has Christ given you in your call as pastor?
2. What authorities are you called to submit to?
3. How can confusion over authority breed discord in a congregation?
4. How can acting with authority in our vocations be God-pleasing?

to answer Jesus because they couldn't find an answer that served their purposes. Faith, which submits to the authority of God and His Word, is willing to change (repent) in the face of God's authoritative correction.

Jesus teaches from His own authority

› Read Matt. 7:24–29

When Jesus taught, He spoke of His own accord, unlike the Scribes who had to appeal to other teachers and traditions to substantiate their claims. Because Jesus is the Word of God incarnate and thus the highest authority of all, He speaks of His own accord, and doesn't need to appeal to any higher authority.

The Father has given Jesus His authority

› Read John 5:25–29

Jesus has authority to judge. He will "come again to judge the living and the dead." For the faithful, Jesus declares a judgment of life and righteousness. For the unfaithful, the judgment is condemnation.

› Read John 12:49

› Read John 17:1–2

Jesus' authority comes from the Father. He does not claim an authority of His own, for His own glory, but He points

to the authority of our Heavenly Father. By the authority given to Jesus, He gives eternal life to all who believe in Him.

To become children of God

- › Read John 1:9–13

Faith in Jesus brings blessings and “rights” we can claim in the kingdom of God. Those who receive Jesus by faith are given the “authority” to become children of God. Faith gives us an authoritative standing as children of God.

Jesus hands on authority

- › Read Matt. 10:1
- › Read Matt. 28:16–20

Jesus establishes that “all authority in heaven and earth” had been given to Him (by His Father). He then hands on that authority so that His work would continue. Without Jesus giving them this authority, the apostles would have no call to make disciples through baptizing, preaching and teaching.

Authority brings responsibility, not power

- › Read Matt. 20:25–28

Jesus prepares His disciples for the time when He will give them His own authority. They do not bear the authority for

their own benefit or glory but so that they might serve with that authority and do the works they are called to perform. The authority of the Office of the Ministry is not given so that God’s people could marvel at the man in the office, but at what God is accomplishing in their own lives through His Means of Grace.

Confidence from authority

- › Read Luke 7:1–10

The centurion understood authority. He himself was under the authority of his superiors and as he was commanded to do, he was compelled to act. He also was one in authority over those under his command. As he told them to go, his charges would go; to come, they would come. He saw that Jesus had authority over illnesses and the things of this world and needed only to say the word and it would be done.

- › Read John 20:21–23
- › Read Luke 10:16

The people of God can hear their pastors speak “in the stead and by the command” of Jesus, and declare their sins forgiven, because their pastors speak what Christ has already declared. We have authority to speak as the One who sent us has spoken, no more and no less.

CONFESSIONAL STUDY

[XIV. Concerning Church Government]

“Concerning church government it is taught that no one should publicly teach, preach, or administer the sacraments without a proper [public] call.”¹

Being rightly called into service in a particular congregation is fundamental to the congregation members being able to look to their pastor as one having authority to preach, teach and administer the Sacraments to them. A call tells a congregation member who their pastor is and that he will have their spiritual best interests at heart when he must proclaim the Law — which their sinful nature will

not like — and when he will proclaim the Gospel — in which their new nature will rejoice.

[XXVIII.] Concerning the Power of Bishops

“Many and various things have been written in former times concerning the power of bishops. Some have improperly mixed the power of bishops with the secular sword, and such careless mixture has caused many extensive wars, uprisings, and rebellions. For the bishops, under the guise of power given to them by Christ, have not only introduced new forms of worship and burdened consciences with reserved cases and with forcible use of the ban, but they also

¹ Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000), 46.

took it upon themselves to set up and depose emperors and kings according to their pleasure.”²

The bishops of which the Augsburg Confession speaks had reached beyond their pastoral calling and God-given authority to preach and teach, and claimed for themselves secular authority. Even more, they used secular means (arrests, fines, etc.) to enforce God’s Word. The churches of the Augsburg Confession were anxious to restore power to the proper authorities.

Today, pastors are tempted to exert our God-given authority into matters that do not pertain to our calling. We should be careful to speak from the Word of God to matters concerning the Word of God. Likewise, we cannot abandon to human whim matters about which God’s Word has clearly spoken.

1. What risk is there in exercising authority beyond one’s calling?

Is the color of paint or type of flooring a matter of God’s Word? No. A pastor could undermine his authority by interjecting himself.

2. Could a trivial matter be so controverted among God’s people that it becomes a matter of spiritual care? What should a pastor do in accordance with his calling?

Sadly even trivial matters can cause deep division among God’s people. Is sin crouching at the doors of those involved? Has the dispute become more important than the truth of God’s Word or right practice?

Then, it might be the time for the pastor to interject — not in the issue that began the strife — but in the eruption of sin that it has become.

[XXVIII.] Concerning the Power of Bishops

“Our people teach as follows. According to the gospel the power of the keys or of the bishops is a power and command of God to preach the gospel, to forgive or retain sin, and to administer and distribute the sacraments. For Christ sent out the apostles with this command (John 20[:21–23*]): ‘As the Father has sent me, so I send you. . . . Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.’”³

The Augsburg Confession locates in God’s Word the authority to forgive and retain sins. In the Small Catechism regarding the Office of the Keys, we confess,

“What do I believe according to these words?”

I believe that when the called ministers of Christ deal with us by His divine command, in particular when they exclude openly unrepentant sinners from the Christian congregation and absolve those who repent of their sins and want to do better, this is just as valid and certain, even in heaven, as if Christ our dear Lord dealt with us Himself.”⁴

Distinguishing between divine and earthly authority and callings grants to God’s people a faithful confidence that their sins are certainly forgiven.

TEACHING/PREACHING USAGE OF THE WORD

Timothy Mech begins his book, *Pastors and Elders*,⁵ with an excellent discussion of distinguishing between “power” and “authority.” I commend not only this particular chapter, but the whole study to my brother pastors to use with their lay-leaders. It will strengthen your work together.

Mech quotes Rev. John W. Kleinig, to define “power” and “authority” as follows:

“Power is a limited ability or commodity. A person has power at the expense of someone else. I must disempower others in order to have it and keep it for myself. Those who lack authority use power. When people operate with power the reaction to them is political. If you operate with power than you have a constant battle with the other power people in your congregation. That leads you to manipulation by the

² Kolb-Wengert, 90

³ Kolb-Wengert, 92.

⁴ Martin Luther, *Luther’s Small Catechism* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1986), 29.

⁵ Timothy Mech, *Pastors and Elders: Caring for the Church and One Another* (Concordia Publishing House, 2011).

great power-monger, Satan. Operate with power and you are operating on Satan's terms.

Authority is an unlimited ability or commodity. You cannot exercise authority unless you are under authority. It is never taken. Authority is given to you by someone else. You can only receive it. I exercise authority by authorizing others to act. You don't exercise authority by keeping it to yourself. The more I give my authority away the greater my authority is. Authority grows with the delegation of authority to others. When authorities speak people listen, even if they don't agree." ⁶

Pastoral authority comes from Scripture. When we preach, teach and provide pastoral care from God's Word, we can do so with confidence that we have not spoken falsely. We can also take comfort in knowing that when we are rejected, they have not rejected our opinion, or even ourselves,

but God. We also take comfort in knowing that when we sin in exercising our authority or take an approach of power, we too have God's sure word of forgiveness to restore us.

In the liturgy of Confession and Absolution, the pastor proclaims, "In the stead and by the command of my Lord Jesus Christ, I forgive you all your sins in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." The people respond with their "Amen."

Who can forgive sins but God alone?! The ones whom He has called and given authority to speak His word. In fact, He has commanded that we proclaim repentance and forgiveness in His name. It's not up to us whether to proclaim it or not! We speak as God has spoken; we can do no other. With a sure confidence born of faith, God's people declare "Amen", "Yes, yes, it shall be so." They have confidence because God has granted such authority to His Church.

DISCUSSION

1. Why is authority so important to the work of the Church?
2. What is often confused with authority and breeds strife?
3. How does clarity about authority bless a congregation? How does it bless you as the pastor?

SUMMARY

Authority is given and delegated from above. Christ has called His Church to proclaim forgiveness and has given us the authority to speak Law and Gospel in His name. Our sinful nature chafes at the thought of being limited by authority. But really, the authority which Christ has bestowed gives us confidence to preach and teach, and gives assurance to our hearers that God's Word and will are truly for them and their salvation.

⁶ Mech, *Pastors and Elders*, 11, quoting *Wisdom for Pastors Seeking Joy in Their Ministry*, John W. Kleinig (Doxology, Inc. 2009), DVD.